

A Psalm of Trust

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I can't tell you how delighted I am that so many of you just make this a regular part of your week to be with us on Tuesday evenings. Your presence is always an encouragement to me and also I'm just encouraged for your sake as we go through the Psalms like this together as there are so many aspects of different colors of different hue that the Psalms bring to us in our intimacy with the Lord and I'm delighted that you are able to take part of that because I believe there's kind of a cumulative impact of the Psalms on our hearts over time and they give us so many different insights into the nature of our walk with the Lord. Psalm 23 is going to be in addition to that and it's quite a contrast with the Psalm that we studied last week. I was physically exhausted for 24 hours after preaching on Psalm 22 last week because in the first half of the Psalm anyway, there were those dark tones of entering into the mind of Christ as he was suffering on the cross and there was an aspect of intimacy with Christ in his sufferings in the fellowship of his sufferings that brought us closer to him. Here tonight in Psalm 23, we get a whole other aspect, a whole different side of intimacy with Christ as we go to Psalm 23.

It's a beautiful and it's a familiar Psalm of David that we are going to look at here tonight and basically, I'm quite confident that there is something for everyone here tonight because Psalm 23 applies to every aspect of our life. It is a Psalm that is the foundation of your walk with Christ and to understand exactly what this Psalm is saying is to drive out doubt, it is to drive out anxiety, and to settle you deeply into a confident serenity with Christ that should mark the entirety of your life. And I want to point something out to you as we begin, having read the Psalm in its entirety just a few moments ago, is that Psalm 23 is a very personal song, it's a very intimate Psalm, and for some reason the word song and Psalm are interchanging in my tongue tonight so if I say song you know I mean Psalm in Psalm 23. But it's an intensely personal Psalm. It's a deeply intimate with the Lord. If you go through the Psalm, 17 times in these brief 6 verses David uses the first singular pronoun "I, me, my." So he's not talking about the Lord in his corporate capacity as the Shepherd of Israel, he's speaking of him as his own personal Shepherd and the beauty of salvation and the nature of the way that the Lord has saved us is this, is that this Psalm is given to us so that we would enter into that same kind of serenity, confidence and trust, that lack of anxiety and that presence of peace that is intended to be the mark of a true Christian and those who truly know the Lord. To know the Lord as your Shepherd is to know perfect peace.

And what David is saying in this Psalm, at least in the first 4 verses is, he's saying that "God is like a Shepherd to me and therefore I will not lack for blessings and security in my life." That's the simplicity of it all. And one of the things that I love about being a pastor to you and knowing you on a personal basis, most of you anyway, is knowing a little bit about the blessings and the challenges that you face. I know that for some of you, anxiety is a particular problem and fear of the future is something that you have wrestled with over time and it's a difficult part of life for you because the anxiety becomes something that almost controls your mind and clouds out the sweetness of fellowship with the Lord. If that's you tonight, I just encourage you to open your mind and open your heart and to enter into the spirit of what David is saying because the Lord intends this to be for you as much as it is for me or for anyone else. This can be your Psalm. And there's a reason why we know this Psalm so well. We know it, you know, I read it often when I'm at someone's bedside at the hospital. I often deliberately will read this at funerals because it is familiar and it's good, I believe, to plow familiar ground at those times where people aren't trying to take in new information but rather they so can revel in the things that are familiar. Kind of like a familiar blanket that wraps you up on a cold winter evening, Psalm 23 wraps our soul with the warmth of Christ and the care that he has uniquely for his sheep.

With that in mind, I want to just give you a sense of what it means to be a shepherd and what that imagery meant to David when he wrote it because not many of us have worked with sheep. I certainly haven't. Not many of us are familiar with the life of a shepherd or what the significance of that is to the sheep. Well, one writer said this who is familiar with the manners and customs of the Bible. He says this and I quote, he 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, leads them at noon to the shelter of a cliff or to the shade of a tree beside the well or 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. Day and night with the sheep, having as his primary responsibility their protection, their guidance, their care. The one that the sheep look to dependently. The one without whom the sheep would be lost and vulnerable to wolves." David says, "That picture of a shepherd with literal sheep is what the Lord is like to me. He is the one who provides for me. He watches over me. I depend upon him. I trust in him and therefore I am at rest." The sheep are always safe when the shepherd was nearby.

Well, that's a picture for us that know Christ with our Lord. The Lord is always with us. He said, "Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age." In Hebrews 13 it says, "I will never, ever forsake you nor will I ever, ever leave you." And so we have this wonderful Shepherd who is with us and committed to our care in the most personal and intimate ways. And what we want to do tonight is just kind of look at 2 pictures that David gives of the Lord and the way that he relates to him with his people. The first thing that we see and our first point for tonight is that God is your shepherd. For those of you

that know the Lord Jesus Christ, God is your shepherd and that has wonderful implications for you.

Notice that David speaks with confidence of the care that the Lord will give to him in the first 2 verses. He says, "The Lord is my shepherd," using the covenant keeping name Yahweh, this faithful, promise keeping God, "is my shepherd, I shall not want. I will not have need that will go unmet under the care of my shepherd." He goes on in verse 2 and says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters." And what I want you to see here, it's easy to have the imagery that he uses of quiet waters and green pastures are naturally comforting. There is something settling just about the imagery that he uses but what I want us to do tonight is to go a little bit beyond the imagery and to go to what that imagery signifies and what it is that he is saying as he uses these beautiful word pictures to portray what the Lord means to him.

What he's saying here first of all in these first 2 verses when he says that God is your shepherd, he first of all is recognizing that God provides for me. Stated differently and stating it in the second person, for you as a Christian, you should consider the Lord in the sense with a primary understanding and commitment of faith that he provides for you and that that is a settled aspect of his care and his disposition toward you. If you have grown up in environments that threatened you with the loss of your salvation, if you sinned across a certain line and that God was just waiting to strike the hammer down on your latest act of disobedience, you especially need to hear this about the Lord. If perhaps you as parents have threatened your children with the withdrawal of love or "God is going to be angry with you over this," we need to come back and kind of clear some of those misconceptions out of our mind because the nature of God toward his people is that of a shepherd, a faithful shepherd who has the care of his sheep paramount in his affections.

If you look at Psalm 23, verse 2 again, he says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters." What is he saying here? He's saying God is like a shepherd who leads his sheep to that which will feed them and that which will water them and that which will provide for their every need. Now, in the Middle East, in the land that David was familiar with, green pastures were a seasonal phenomenon. The land was green during the rainy seasons of winter and spring but it would turn brown in the dry arid times of summer and fall. So there might be times where the sheep weren't able to see anything that was in front of them to eat and to be able to feed themselves on but even in those brown times, even when the land was sometimes parched, the shepherd who knew the lay of the land perfectly, who knew everything about the domain and the geography of where the sheep are at, he would lead them to those places where they could find that which would provide for them. David is saying, "The Lord is like that with me." He's saying, "The Lord knows the total geography of my life. He knows everything that there is about everything that is around me and he knows exactly how to lead me to that precise place which will be the fulfillment of what he has ordained for me, to that which will care for the needs that I have in this life."

So in those times when the ground was brown and bare, the sheep had to particularly rely on the shepherd in those times where things were scarce and as we consider that, it gives

us a picture for those of you going through the particular dry times spiritually perhaps, perhaps financially or whatever you're going through here as you come in this evening, is to realize that what this imagery is teaching us, it is profoundly teaching us not to fix our eyes on the circumstances that are about us but rather to be mindful of the fact that the Lord is the shepherd who knows the lay of the land, who knows what's ahead, who knows where to go, who knows how to conduct us and therefore despite whatever your outward circumstances may be, if you're a Christian, you are utterly secure. You are perfectly cared for. The sheep didn't know necessarily what was over the next hill but the shepherd did and there we are in a similar position with Yahweh as our shepherd, with the Lord Jesus Christ as our shepherd, realizing that he is utterly capable of leading us to wherever is necessary to provide for whatever needs that we might have.

David mentions the quiet waters there at the end of verse 2. Those were the springs of water where the sheep could drink without being rushed. There was an element of rest and peacefulness and a lack of hurry as the sheep gathered around the spring to drink. And all of this is a picture, David is painting a word picture on a canvas to try to communicate to us under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the perfect way that God cares for us and the way that our lives can be marked by a deep, profound serenity. And the question is whether you know the Lord like that, whether that is the characteristic mark of your spiritual life or not or are you racked by anxiety? Are you racked by care? Well, if you are, this Psalm is not so much a rebuke to that but rather it is an invitation to realize that your life as a Christian is not supposed to be that way, that your life as a Christian is meant to be marked by this settled trust and confidence in a God who is in providential control of everything and who has your best interest at heart. This is to settle us and beloved, this is to mark, this is to be the characteristic of our inner attitude toward the Lord. Not one of suspicion, not one of questions, "Why this or why that? Why did you do this? What's going to happen to me tomorrow?" with a sense of fear and anxiety characterizing us whether it's in minor circumstances or with terminal illness or with relationships that are profoundly astray. All of those things are meant to come under this umbrella of care and to realize that the totality of who I am is in the totality of the hands of a loving, caring shepherd.

So I just invite you to ask yourself whether that's the mark of your life or not or whether you are marked by a troubling concern of anxiety. Well, if you're marked by a troubling anxiety, this Psalm is the medicine for your soul and the power of this truth is wonderful for us. What I'm about to say is just very, very basic but at the same time, I'm pretty confident after a lot of years in ministry that not every Christian lives here. Your confidence, your trust, your peace and serenity, do not come from knowing what the future holds. You do not need to know what the future holds for you in order to be peaceful and confident and joyful like David describes in this Psalm. Our confidence comes from knowing this good God who is always with us and that is the defining cornerstone. That is the anchor of spiritual life is the knowledge of God, not the knowledge of our circumstances, not the knowledge of the future.

I was out in the car for a while the other day, had the radio on to a particular station just kind of going through the dial and there was an ad for a psychic that came on playing on

this fear that people have of not knowing the future and using that to bring them into fraud and deceit and potentially demonic activity in order to calm their fears. Well, you understand, don't you, that none of that has any relevance to us as Christians? That we don't need any of that? That we don't need to know what tomorrow holds at all as long as we understand who God is, that we belong to him and that he cares for us like a shepherd cares for his sheep.

God is your shepherd. He will provide for you and that's guaranteed as you go further along and deeper into the Psalm as David unpacks this imagery for us. Look at verse 3 as he says to God, it's not just that he provides for you but he's going to show us that he guides you in verse 3 and I love this. Again, just the certainty and the confidence of this in Psalm 23:3, he says, "He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake." The shepherd guides the sheep and directs them and takes them to where they need to go. David says, "That's exactly what the Lord does for me. This is exactly how he directs the course of my life." Proverbs 16:9 says that, "The mind of man plans his way but the Lord directs his steps," and what you and I have to do is we have to step back from looking at the circumstances around us and realize the hidden, the invisible realities that govern the universe and to recognize and to affirm and let it shape our approach to life what Scripture says about the prevailing providence of God: that he is in charge; that he loves us and cares for us and therefore as we go through life, he is directing our steps with a hidden hand to certainly bring us to the place that we need to go.

The "paths of righteousness," that term there, can also be understood as the right paths and I like that idea, the right paths. In other words, the path that is uniquely appointed for you. The life that God has uniquely created you to live as the stage upon which you would play out his glory in your life. He guides you into the right paths so that that result would be accomplished. The shepherd knows what lies ahead and he leads the sheep in the path that leads to the right destination. Sometimes the outward surroundings of life will seem to contradict that. I understand that. It seems like much of my life was spent living in that sense of contradiction between what I saw and what actually the reality of things were to be and so I say that with sympathy as we talk here this evening. But beloved, here's what you need to think about and we'll talk about this more toward the end of the message also but I just want to bring it out here as well. As we are reading about the Lord as our shepherd, as we remember that Christ described himself as the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for the sheep, beloved, honestly, you and I both, we really need to get beyond this sense of prevailing anxiety and worry that sometimes marks us in our lives and see that for how unworthy it is of our Christ. There is no reason for us to question what lies ahead. There is no reason for us to question the intentions of God in our life for those of us that know Christ. There is never a justification for doubting his love. None whatsoever. "How can you say that not knowing the circumstances that everyone is in?" Look, you don't have to know the circumstances. We know all that we need to know about the love of God by looking back 2,000 years to the cross at Calvary where Christ laid down his life as a ransom payment for your salvation, as that which would pay for and expunge your sins from the record so that you could be reconciled to God. This should be especially clear in our minds after Psalm 22 last week, of just

recognizing the fact that he suffered and he bled and he died in utter isolation out of love for your soul. Out of love for you. Out of a desire to redeem you and to secure your soul infallibly that you might be with him throughout all of the halls of eternity.

On what basis, beloved, do we ever question the love of Christ for our souls? On what basis do we ever doubt him? That is so unworthy of the cross, isn't it? Can you imagine, I've said this before, it's just a reflection of how often my mind goes back to this, can you imagine standing 2,000 years ago understanding the purpose of salvation and why Christ was on the cross and look up at him in his sufferings and say, "You know, I'm really not sure if you love me or not." That's unthinkable. The thought of that is really almost blasphemous, isn't it? To challenge the love of Christ in light of Calvary? How can we do that? And here's the thing: there comes a point in the course of spiritual growth and as we're talking about spiritual growth on Sunday morning as well these days, there just comes a point in your spiritual life where there are certain questions that you just consider to be asked and answered and therefore they are not to be raised again. That was a common objection to a line of questioning in a courtroom, "Your Honor, that question has been asked and answered. It shouldn't be asked again." "Objection sustained. Don't ask that question anymore."

Well look, that's the way it should be in the way that you think about the love of God and the love of Christ and his care for you. That question should be settled and you should not permit your heart to reopen it as if it was open for discussion. The love of Christ is not open for discussion. The care of the shepherd for the sheep is never to be questioned. We are to rest and settle in that and it's not just the negative saying, "I'm not going to question that," it's the positive dimension of that especially that says, "Not only am I not going to question against it and doubt it, to the contrary, I'm going to repeatedly affirm it and rest in it and let that shape the entire way that I view life. My life is shaped by and directed by a Christ who loves me supremely. He has established that at the cross. I'm going to glorify him for that forever and therefore in this little interim period of time where I'm not sure of what the next step is going to be, I'm not going to go there. I'm going to rest in him. I'm going to trust him. I'm going to honor him. I'm going to praise him before I even know the answer to my dilemma." Why? Because he provides for me. He guides me. He's like a shepherd. The sheep didn't rise up in rebellion against the shepherd. Why would they do that? That was their source of provision, their source of guidance.

As you go deeper into this Psalm, you just see how certain this is, how necessary this is, by which I mean it could be no other way. As you go deeper into Psalm 23, you see the utter certainty of these things. Look at Psalm 23:3 with me again and realizing that God's preeminent goal is his own glory in the universe. Psalm 23:3 has an incredible phrase at the end of it. It says, "He restores my soul." Christian, even in your sinful ways, even in your failures and your disobedience of the past day or 2 or 3, the shepherd is there to restore your soul, to cleanse you from sin, to restore you to a right relationship with him having your heart cleansed from all unrighteousness. That's how gracious and loving and merciful he is. "He guides me in the paths of righteousness," what? Why? This is incredible. "He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." This is a guarantee of the certainty of God's skillful direction of your life. It's an absolute

guarantee. It is something that transcends whether you deserve it or not. It transcends your ability to understand it. It's something that transcends you altogether. This amplifies the certainty of it. What this verse is saying is that God stakes the honor of his name on the way that he leads you. He guides you for his name's sake. This is for his glory that he does it and his glory can no more fail than the universe could collapse while he is upholding it. And it's another guarantee of the certainty of his blessing on his sheep. He guides you because he intends to bring glory to his own name out of the way that he handles your life and your circumstances.

What does that mean tonight? When the Lord is your shepherd? When God has guided you to the exact place where you are right here this evening? Where he has guided you is precisely the place where he will bless you for his name's sake and as we were saying on Sunday, the spouse that you have, the children that you have, the job that you have, the lack of things that you might have, the abundance that you have, all of that has been orchestrated by God to bring you to exactly to this point where he would lead you from here on out in order to bless you to the glory of his name. So there is far more to the circumstances of your life. There is far more to that which causes you anxiety. There is far more at stake than what happens to you or to me. There is so much more that is going on in this invisible realm that we can't see or touch, that is the ultimate reality of what God is doing in your life. He intends to bring glory to his name through the overall way that he deals with you in life.

So in order to magnify his name, in order to show forth the goodness of his character, the greatness of his grace, the magnitude of his mercy, how can it do anything other than, out supremely good for you in the end? It's for his name's sake. There will be no one standing in the realms of eternity looking on you and saying, "Oh, God failed in his dealings with you, didn't he? Look at the little corner that you're standing in." No, it's not going to be like that. God will be supremely glorified by the way that he deals with us and the outcome of our lives and the outcome of eternity far transcends any individual difficulty or struggle that we're going through in any particular time of our life. So the Lord has led us to this point, he is going to lead us on. He's going to glorify his name for us. We are going to experience the blessing of his guidance and provision in the end.

Now, let's get into your kitchen a little bit. I had a friend back in California who when things got personal or the word convicted her, she was very sweet as she said this, this was a way of encouragement and she'd say, "Don, you're starting to meddle. You're starting to meddle with my life." She is almost 90 now and in a nursing home and as sweet as she ever was. Dear Frances Gregg. But I want to get personal with you in terms of what we're talking about here this evening, those of you that maybe are a little further along in life or those of you that are on the brink and considering where is my life going to go from here and those of you particularly that are discouraged or dissatisfied with things in life. You really need to hear this. Do you know what this teaching from Psalm 23 does for you on a practical level? It keeps you from making mistakes that are rooted in your dissatisfaction with life. This is very significant and it's very important and will bring a lot of stability to your life if you will receive it and believe it and rest in it. When you understand the implications of Psalm 23, you no longer reason on this level which is

so common to the thinking of the world and probably predominate in most of your friends whether Christian or otherwise. You don't reason on this level where you say, "I don't like this situation. I don't like these circumstances. I have to get out of here. I have to move on. I need a new job. I need a new spouse. I need a new this or that." No, no, no, no, no, no, no. That is not Christians thinking. That is an entirely wrong way to think. When you understand that the Lord is your shepherd and that he is guiding you and providing for you and in the midst of exactly the life that he has given to you, you think more along these lines: you look at your dissatisfaction and the temptation to make a hasty decision to get out of it and then you step back and you say, "No. No. My Shepherd led me here. My Shepherd led me to this and he will lead me through this. Is there something more for me to learn or do before I move on?" So you don't just hastily react to adverse circumstances trying to get out of them, you patiently submit yourself to the leadership of the Shepherd who led you to this point, who intends to glorify his name through your response to this point and all of a sudden you're not just reacting to life, you're living in response to the glory of God being manifested in his provision for you and it settles you down and it keeps you from having itchy feet, always looking for the next thing to move on to. This is so important, so life shaping.

He guides us in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Now, it doesn't mean you don't move, it doesn't mean you don't change jobs. I'm not saying any of that. What I'm saying is you check your motivation and what it is that you're trying to do. If you're just trying to get out of bad circumstances, you're not thinking like a Christian. You're not thinking as Psalm 23 teaches us to think where we rest, we are at peace, we are serene, we are not troubled by what's happening about us as though it were something that we were to flee and run from.

Well, there's another aspect of God as our Shepherd, he provides for you, he guides you, what you see in verse 4 is that he protects you as well. As we witness the disintegration of our society around us as it is kind of watching a slow play of a major train wreck happening in slow motion before you, there's a sense of, "Well, what's going to happen? What does the future hold? What is this going to mean for me?" Again, we need to turn off the news and disconnect ourselves from social media and root ourselves in God's word if we want to get to the reality of it for us and to have a sense of confidence going forward. What does the Shepherd do? He protects you. Look at verse 4 where it says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," it could be translated the valley of deep darkness. It's not simply limited to the expiration of life but those dark times where the future seems uncertain. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil." Why? "For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

What a challenge, what a spiritual height to attain after, this idea that, "I fear no evil. That I look to the future without fear. I look to it with confidence." How can you live that way? Is that reserved for something that was 3,000 years ago in an agrarian culture where there wasn't this kind of rapid change that we see happening around us? Oh, that couldn't be it because they experienced their own sense of war and famine and deprivation, didn't they? What is he saying here? Again, getting past the imagery of the word picture on the

canvas, what is he saying? The hill country of Israel was marked by and still is to this day, marked by steep ravines and caves. You remember that David would hide out in caves sometimes when he was in danger. Well, in those caves, it was often the habit of wild beasts or robbers to hide in there and to lurk about in the shadows waiting for someone unsuspecting to walk by and to strike and to get their prey. It was dangerous to pass through those areas in those valleys. What David is saying is that, "When life is like that for me where there are threats and uncertainties that abound about me, I'm not afraid. I am not afraid of impending death. I am not afraid of what others can do. I am not afraid of financial collapse. I'm not afraid of the collapse of my country. None of that troubles my soul," he says here. "I am not afraid of that ill doing for one single reason, you are with me." This is a statement, in other words. David is making a statement about the complete sufficiency of Yahweh to satisfy his soul. We as Christians on this side of the cross would say, "I fear no evil because my Lord Jesus Christ is with me. He is with me always, lo, even to the end of the age. What have I to fear?" The nobility of the soul that enters into the richness of Psalm 23, the richness of that cannot be adequately plunged.

Now notice something. There are just so many things. I feel a little bit like a tour guide, having to go through quickly and say, "Well, notice this over here. Now notice this over here." Notice that David says, "I fear no evil." He's not saying, "I'll never experience darkness." Quite to the contrary, verse 5 speaks about the presence of his enemies. He's talking about in verse 4 of going through a valley of deep darkness, going through the shadow of death, and so this is not a promise that we will be exempted from the sorrows of living in a fallen world. It's not that. What it is is that he is saying, "What I have in Yahweh," what you say is, "What I have in the Lord Jesus Christ, in belonging to him in whom are all the riches of wisdom, him who is my righteousness, sanctification and justification, in Christ I have everything that I need so that what happens around me is of secondary importance and does not overtake and overrule the confidence of my soul."

So beloved, whether you know this by experience yet or not, most of you do, the right paths for you, I say this sympathetically and lovingly as your pastor: in God's perspective, the right paths for you are sometimes going to be going through dark times, going through dark, difficult places. The health and prosperity Gospel is a total lie. The sense that God exists in order to fix all of your problems so that you go through life with a minimal amount of disruption is not true. The thought that you can pray and God will instantly change everything to your liking is sub-Christian at best. What Scripture is teaching us is that, "Even though I walk through times like that, I'm not afraid because you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." And the rod and the staff are another picture of the way in which God cares for his own. The rod of which David speaks, when we think of a rod, we think of kind of a narrow thing like a piece of rebar maybe, but the rod to the shepherd was a club-like weapon, a heavy weapon, more like a heavy bat, that at the fat end of the part of it would have embedded nails or flint or rock or something like that. It was an offensive weapon that the shepherd would use to club off threats to the sheep. If an animal came and attacked the sheep, he would beat back the attacking animal with his rod. David says, "God, you protect me like that. You use what's at your disposal in order to protect me from danger. That's why I'm not afraid."

The staff was a curved instrument about 6 feet long. It had a crook on the end of it and it was what the shepherd used to direct the sheep gently and to put them in the right way, to collar them and direct them in the way that they are to go. Combined David is saying, "You beat back my enemies and you use your providential guiding hand to direct me in the way that you want me to go. Why would I be afraid? The totality of my existence is under your protection from evil and your provision and your direction and your guidance. What can go wrong? Nothing can go wrong when I am under the care of a shepherd like that." Taken together, it represents God's constant presence to guide and protect the sheep. You as a born-again Christian which is a redundant term, right? Those of you who belong to Christ, you are under the constant, prevailing care of God. He watches you at all times.

Now, I want to deal with something here. This needs to be said. Do I have your attention? Good. What you need to do at this point is do away with that little 3 letter word "but" that so many of you are prone to use. "Oh, I know all of this, Pastor, but you don't know blah, blah, blah. But you..." Do away with buts in this. There are no buts in Psalm 23 that would qualify or diminish this. You don't let, beloved, you don't let your experience or your present difficulties become a justification to contradict the revealed word of God in Psalm 23. And why would you do that anyway? Why not just take God's word at face value and say, "I'm going to rest in that," rather than trying to stir up something that would contradict and dilute this from being your own personal spiritual experience. So if you're sitting here listening to this and you say, "I believe that. I believe that but," you're not getting it at all. You don't get it at all if the word "but" is in your mind as you're hearing this and I just have to be that direct. Why? I've got to be that direct to drive out that which would keep you from benefiting from the fullness of God's word in your heart here this evening. Do away with the word "but."

David says, "I fear no evil. None. I'm not afraid because you're with me. Your rod and your staff, there's my comfort. The protection of God. The guidance of God. I have everything that I need right there." And beloved, that's only going to be meaningful for you and you're only going to prove the value of this if it's challenged. If you are tested on this point and say, "Whoa, you know, now life is at stake here. What I have lived and worked for are on the table and I don't know the outcome. My marriage is at stake. Those loved ones that I have prayed for that don't know Christ, their eternity is at stake." And you come back to the rod and the staff of God, his protection and his guidance, and you say, "I'm not afraid of evil. I'm resting right here. I trust my Shepherd that much," you say.

Now, look, starting to meander here but that's okay. This talks about a brook and what does a brook do if it doesn't meander around a bit? Let me just say a word to those of you and those of you that have lost loved ones who did not know Christ, those of you who are praying for loved ones and there is just no evidence that they have any interest in the Gospel or that they are ever going to turn, how do you deal with that? Well, there's something really significant that you need to understand: the most profound, valuable possession that God ever gave you was your eternal soul. That is the most valuable thing that you have. If you trust Christ enough to entrust to him your eternal soul, your eternal

destiny and say, "I am trusting you completely to take care of my eternal soul," then included within that is a lesser included entrustment of everything else that matters to you so that you say, "I have entrusted my soul to you and because I have entrusted my soul to you and its eternal well-being then, Lord, I'm just going to trust you with everything else as well. All of the loved ones that I care about that don't know Christ, all of the prayers that seem to be going unanswered. I am just going to rest in the fact that you are my Shepherd, my loving, gracious Shepherd and even though it seems that death and destruction and hell are closing in all about on those that I care about, I'm still not going to be afraid. I'm going to trust you even for that." That is the kind of trust of which Christ is preeminently worthy. You can't trust him for your own salvation and then distrust him when things that you care about don't seem to be going the way that you want. You trust him unconditionally, completely for it all. It's not like you can save anyone's soul anyway. You might as well trust Christ for it and for whatever the outcome is. And when you trust Christ like that, then you are displaying how preeminently worthy of glory and trust he really is. "Lord, I'll trust you even when my loved ones die without you. I'll trust you and not be afraid. Why? Because you are with me. You are guiding. You are providing and I trust you even if I don't understand."

When you think about it, it could be no other way. It could be no other way. You can't say, "Well, I trust Christ and I love him but I'm going to be unsettled and anxious and worried over my unsaved loved one." It doesn't work that way. Oh yes, we pray for them. Oh yes, we weep over them. Oh yes, we urgently ask God to work in their lives to save them. But when it's all said and done we trust God no matter what the outcome is because we cannot love an earthly human being more than we love our Christ and we rest in Christ no matter what the future holds for those that are closest to us. We love them, we plead with them, we beg them to come to Christ. We weep over them but we fear no evil because our Lord is with us. That's how far this goes. And you understand from Psalm 23 that the Shepherd orders life so that no ultimate harm comes to you and you stay there, you rest there. That's how great he is. That's how worthy of our trust he is, that all of the cares of life go there and we rest and fear nothing because he is with us.

Now, as David goes on, he has spent these 4 verses talking about the Lord as a shepherd, as he goes on, he changes the imagery in verses 5 and 6 and whereas God has been a faithful shepherd in the first 4 verses, in verses 5 and 6 you could say that God is your gracious host. Your gracious host. Now, as I said as you move into verse 5, David changes the imagery and now he's comparing the Lord to the host of a great banquet that he has prepared for him. Look at verse 5. He says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows." And what he's describing here is this great welcome. God welcomes you into his presence as the host that has welcomed you. In the culture of that era, a homeowner had a bond of loyalty with his guest. Not just a bond of loyalty but a responsibility to protect his guest while that guest was under his roof. One writer on manners and customs says this and I quote, this is very interesting, he says, "When a host accepts a man to be his guest, he agrees at whatever cost to defend his guest from all possible enemies during the time of his entertainment." Continuing on in the quote, "An American missionary was entertained by a governor and the host took a piece of roast mutton and handed it to the

missionary and as he did he said this, 'Now do you know what I have done? By that act I have pledged to you every drop of my blood that while you are in my territory, no evil shall come to you. For that space of time we are brothers.'" David here is taking that cultural custom, that cultural practice and saying, "God deals with me like that. He has prepared a table before me. I'm in his presence as a guest, as it were. I am under the care of his loyal, royal responsibility to care for me and there is no harm that could possibly come to me when I am in the home of Yahweh, when I am in the home of Christ. He has pledged his protection over me so that no ultimate harm can come to me." When he says, "Yahweh, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies even though there are threats all about me," David is saying, "I am utterly secure because the host will protect me."

And he goes on there at the end of verse 5, look at that with me as we continue on. He says, "You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows." And here he's describing a privilege that is given to the guest by the host that is welcoming him into his presence. One traveler from the 1800s described a similar custom of this pouring out of oil like this, he said, "I once had this ceremony performed on myself in the house of a great and rich Indian in the presence of a large company. The gentleman of the house poured upon my hands and arms a delightful perfume. He put a golden cup in my hand and poured wine into it until it ran over assuring me that it was a great pleasure to him to receive me and that I should find a rich supply in his house." "Don't worry about the wine spilling, there is so much more where that came from that it doesn't matter if we spill it over. I just want you to feel the welcome of my generosity. I honor you with the oil. I anoint you as a welcome guest into my home." And what David is saying with this imagery, he says that "God has been so generous to me. He has established me in such a position of privilege that I recognize that, I honor him and I feel secure."

Well, what about Christ? What about us 3,000 years later on this side of the cross? What do we have in Christ? What do we have in Christ except for a great Host who literally shed his blood for our protection. Who literally poured out his blood to protect us from the consequences of our sin. To protect us from the devil who prowls like a roaring lion seeking to devour us. Who literally intervened in the midst of false teachers trying to lead us astray and intervened and brought us under the protection of his shed blood where he will keep us forever. What are we then? We are completely secure. We are completely welcome. Christ did this in order to welcome us into the presence of God and one day we will safely enter into his heavenly kingdom where we will find a perfect welcome so much greater than anything that we imagined and it will be more than literal wine being poured into a golden cup, there will be blessings untold and when we go to heaven, when we enter into the presence of Christ, for the first time since we became a Christian, we are going to feel truly, truly, truly at home. It's saying, "This is where I belong. This is what I was appointed for before eternity began." No more jostling around with a hostile world who is hostile to our Christ. A gracious Host pouring out welcome upon us that he purchased with his own blood. A Shepherd, a Host like that.

Now, what is the conclusion that you should draw from that? How do you take this and apply it to your life? Point 3 here. We said that the Lord is your Shepherd, the Lord is

your Host, point 3: trust is your response. Trust is your response. David brings this all to a climax and he works out the implications of what this means that God is like this, that Christ is of this nature. He's like a shepherd. He's like a host. What does that mean for me now? What does this mean for my life? Verse 6, "Surely," most assuredly, most certainly, what? "Goodness and loving kindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." Here's where the character of God should lead you as a Christian. This should be your settled assessment of the way life is going to turn out for you and what happens to you in the meantime even in the midst of the difficulties.

David says, "Surely goodness and lovingkindness," God's loyal, faithful love, "will follow you all the days of your life." God blesses us not occasionally, not on a come-and-go basis, but his grace, his mercy, his kindness, his loyalty to his people are like servants attending to us day by day, moment by moment, faithfully providing in the midst of everything to guide and to provide and to direct so that the outcome is a manifestation of his blessing in a way that goes beyond anything that we could ask or think. That's the outcome for us as Christians. Goodness and mercy. Goodness and loyal love. Tending to us moment by moment, day by day, through hard times, through good times, through joy, through sorrows, through temptations, through victories. Through it all tending carefully to us as though they were servants to bring about the proper result.

"All the days of my life." And then in the conclusion, I enter into his presence forever. You know, when you see this, the passage in John 10 is familiar to us as well. Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Psalm 23 informs our understanding of that. The Good Shepherd who protects, who guides, who provides. The Host who welcomes and pours out blessing upon us. At the cross, our ultimate Shepherd. At the cross, hanging in shame on our behalf that our sins might be placed on him and his righteousness, his full obedience to God credited to our account so that we would be fully justified before him as an act of grace and a declaration from God. What a Shepherd. What a position of privilege we have in Christ. We respond to this by trusting him. Charles Spurgeon said and I will close with this, he said, "Goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. The black days as well as the bright days. The days of fasting as well as the days of feasting. The dreary days of winter as well as the bright days of summer. Goodness supplies our needs and mercy blots out our sins. While I am here, I will be a child at home with my God. And when I die, I shall not change my company nor even change the house, I shall only go to dwell in the upper storey of the house of the Lord forever."

Let's pray.

God, our gracious Shepherd and our gracious Host, grant us grace to dwell in the serenity of this most blessed Psalm. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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