

“My Shepherd”

A Sermon on Psalm 23

Texts: Psalm 23:1-6; Revelation 7:9-17

With the possible exception of John 3:16, there is perhaps no more familiar portion of the Bible than the 23rd Psalm. Many people memorize it as children, and the text of the 23rd Psalm set against the backdrop of a pastel landscape adorns the stock funeral program in virtually every mortuary in the United States. As the most famous of all the Psalms, the “shepherd’s Psalm” has been set to music by Bach, Schubert, and Williams. It is recited by characters in countless movies and novels whenever the plot requires proof that someone is a Christian or generically religious. But the 23rd Psalm is beloved by Christians because of its simple confidence in God’s goodness, and because of Jesus’ identification of himself as the “good shepherd” who accompanies us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

As we continue our series on select Psalms, we now take up the 23rd Psalm, which is classified a “Psalm of trust” reflecting the believer’s confidence in God’s tender care of his people. So far in our series on the Psalms we have considered Psalms written by David, Moses, and the Sons of Korah. We have considered royal Psalms, Psalms used in temple worship, and wisdom Psalms. As we have done throughout this series, we will put this Psalm in its historical context, go through the text of the Psalm, and then we will look at how this particular Psalm (and the Shepherd imagery it contains) is applied to Jesus, and used by John in the Book of Revelation, making several points of application as we do so.

The 23rd Psalm is attributed to David (Israel’s shepherd-king), although no title or authorship is attached to the Psalm itself. Found in the First Book of the Psalter (which includes Psalms 1-41), Psalm 23 draws on the familiar image of the Lord (YHWH) as a shepherd who cares for his sheep (the people of Israel). Shepherd imagery was very familiar to everyone living in Israel at the time of David, and in fact, reflects David’s own experience as a shepherd responsible for the care of his flock. In 1 Samuel 17:34-35, we read, “*but David said to Saul, ‘Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him.’*” David knew what was involved in the care of sheep, and in this Psalm he depicts God as the true shepherd of Israel. Some scholars contend that the Psalm reflects David’s time in the wilderness when he was hiding from Absalom—which may or may not be the case. But this Psalm does reflect a sense of readiness to face trials, difficulties, and danger because of our confidence in the Lord’s presence with us, especially in light of the fact that being in the presence of the Lord for all of eternity is every Christian’s hope.¹

It is the famed preacher Charles Spurgeon who reminds us of the significance of the location of this Psalm in Book One of the Psalter. Says Spurgeon, the 23rd Psalm “follows the twenty-second [Psalm], which is peculiarly the Psalm of the Cross. There are no green pastures, no still waters on the other side of the twenty-second Psalm. It is only after we have read ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!’ that we come to ‘The Lord is my shepherd.’ We must by experience know the value of bloodshedding and see the sword awakened against the shepherd, before we shall be able truly to know the

¹ Kidner, Psalms 1-72, 109.

sweetness of the good shepherd's care."² Spurgeon is right. The key to understanding this Psalm is not to focus on the sheep (as many Christian authors do), but to focus on the goodness of the shepherd.

The 23rd Psalm is short (six verses) so its structure is relatively simple. In verses 1-4, the author uses the shepherd metaphor to discuss God's goodness, while in verses 5-6, the author speaks of the shepherd as one who has prepared a lavish feast for his own. The author (David) is fully confident of God's goodness, in this life and in the next. Meditating on God's goodness has brought him great comfort.

But there is no doubt that it is the warm and personal tone of this Psalm which makes it so appealing, especially because of the comfort it gives us during the moments of life's greatest trials. Christians have found comfort in this Psalm because Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd, and in the Book of Revelation John describes the glories of the age to come as being in the presence of God's messianic shepherd.³ There is much more to this Psalm and its shepherd theme than the six verses we find here. This Psalm clearly points us to Jesus, the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

So, with these things in mind, let us take up the text of the 23rd Psalm.

The Psalm begins (as is often the case in the Psalter), by affirming the name of God in such a way as to remind the reader of God's covenant promise to provide for, and to protect his people. "*The Lord is my shepherd.*" In making his covenant with Israel, YHWH swore his covenant oath to bless his people, while at the same time threatening the covenant curses upon those who renounce him. This covenant oath is recounted in a passage such as Exodus 34:6-7. "*The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.*"

Notice that David does not merely invoke the name of YHWH as the God of Israel (which, of course YHWH is). Remarkably, David invokes the name of God as his own shepherd—"my shepherd." This is a heartfelt expression of faith (trust in God's promise) and gratitude (a profound sense of thanksgiving for all the blessings that God has extended to him). YHWH is the God of Israel. He is also the God of each Israelite. More importantly, YHWH is David's shepherd.

In light of his personal expression of YHWH as *his* God ("my shepherd"), it is important to consider the fact that throughout the Psalms, God is most often spoken of as king or deliverer, or as the impersonal "shield" or "rock." In contrast, the metaphor of God as shepherd is highly personal. The shepherd lives with his flock—24/7. The shepherd leads the flock to food and water. He protects the defenseless sheep from predators like wolves and lions (as David did). The shepherd attends to the sheep's wounds and injuries. The sheep completely and totally depend upon their shepherd. They never question his leadership, nor do they ever complain. They simply follow him wherever he takes them.

This is why the affirmation that YHWH is David's shepherd immediately leads to the affirmation, "*I shall not want.*" YHWH had provided for the needs of Israel throughout their entire time in the

² Spurgeon, The Treasury of David, Vol. 1, Psalms 1-87, 353.

³ VanGemeren, Psalms, Vol. 5., 252.

wilderness. YHWH gave the Israelites manna to eat, and he led them to water in the desert. Like a shepherd, YHWH protected Israel from its enemies, and then brought his people into the promised land (that good land flowing with milk and honey). This is because YHWH the shepherd is faithful to his covenant promises—a theme reflected throughout the Psalms (i.e., Psalm 77:20: “*You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron,*” Psalm 78:52: “*Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock*”) and in a passage such as Isaiah 40:11 (“*He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young*”). The metaphor of YHWH as shepherd makes perfect sense, given his tender care for his people in light of his covenant promise. David can express full confidence in God’s provision because God’s track record of keeping his covenant promises is beyond question.

In verse 2, David follows up the introduction of YHWH as shepherd with the specifics of God’s care for his people. David starts with the setting, “*He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.*” Green pastures are essential for the well-being of the sheep. As long as the pasture remains green, the shepherd need not risk the flock by moving it to a new location. Pastures were green in Israel during the winter and spring because this followed the rainy season and the weather was cooler. By late spring and summer, and even more so in the fall, the grass began to turn brown or give way to weeds which were not good for the sheep to eat. During this time of year, the shepherd had to lead the flock to a new location near a spring. Not only was it possible for sheep to wander off, the move made the sheep vulnerable to attack by predators, and there was no certainty that the spring the shepherd was seeking was even flowing. But in YHWH’s green pasture, the sheep are able to lie down and rest without worry about weeds, predators, or drought. YHWH’s green pasture has a deep well or spring (still waters) which always flows, so the sheep are always well feed and watered, not harried or threatened by drought.

It is against the backdrop of the image of a green pasture with plenty of water and safety that David speaks of YHWH’s provision in the first part of verse 3. “*He restores my soul.*” Just as the sheep in YHWH’s green pasture find rest and provision (their every need is met), so too does David. When David considers the goodness of God, his soul is restored. His faith in God’s promises, his devotion to the things of the Lord, and his confidence in God’s ability to meet David’s needs is renewed and strengthened. Just as the sheep finds rest and flourishes in the green pasture because of the abundance all around it, so too David is renewed in the inner man (his soul) when he considers the goodness of God, and how God meets each one of his needs.

While the sheep only need to be led to the right place (where there is food and water), David needs to be led to the right place in the right way. As we read in the second half of verse 3, “*He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*” There is no moral dimension to the life of a sheep. The sheep faces no hard choices about right or wrong, or how to live. The sheep follows the shepherd without question, eats and sleeps, but will stray and wander off if the shepherd is not keeping watch. Obviously, life is much more complicated for us. We not only need to be led to a place of rest and refreshment, but we need to conduct ourselves in the right way while we are being led.

The expression David uses here (“path of righteousness”) is very similar to the language of Proverbs 11:5 where we read, “*the righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight, but the wicked falls by his own wickedness.*” The biblical metaphor for such conduct is the avoidance of the crooked path. The shepherd does not wear out his sheep by taking long and circuitous routes to their next location. He takes the right path, not the crooked path. Furthermore, when we trust the shepherd and live in gratitude before him because of all he has done for us, we seek to honor him “*for his name's sake.*” We do not take his

name in vain (or trivialize it), nor do we invoke the names of other gods provoking the Lord's wrath.

With the comforting image of the green pasture set before us, in verse 4, the author takes us in a surprising direction by introducing a troubling image. While we are being led by our shepherd to the green pasture, we discover that the right path down which he is leading us might take us through that place we dread the most. "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*" If the green pasture is located along the right path, so too is the dreaded valley of the shadow of death. The knowledge that we enter such a dreadful place at the leading and with the guidance of the shepherd serves to remind us that the shepherd is responsible for whatever happens to us. This is why we should have no fear. Our shepherd is present with us every step of the way.

In the original language, the image is that of a deep ravine or a wadi (i.e., a gully) where there are long shadows because the sun does not reach down into it for much of the day (i.e., "dark as death").⁴ It is the kind of place where you lose all sense of direction and perspective. Such a valley is a place of fear and uncertainty. The presence of such darkness and gloom almost certainly carries with it the sense that the path we take will lead through all sorts of crises, and may even bring us to the time or threat of death as in a serious illness. There is no question that this valley is appropriately called the "shadow of death" because the fear and threat of death is certainly the point of the metaphor.

But even as death (or a serious crisis) is the point of the image, it is the shepherd who leads us through such a valley (a fearful or dreaded place). Even as the metaphor shifts from a lush green pasture to a deep valley with little sun light and dominated by shadows (i.e., the valley of the shadow of death), the point is that the shepherd has brought us to this place. As God promised Moses in Exodus 3:12 ("*I will be with you*") before sending Moses back to Egypt where Moses feared arrest and death, so too God will lead us through this dark valley, keeping every one of those covenant promises he has made to his people.

He will not only lead us in the way we should go, but because the shepherd is with us, we are not to fear evil—evil being a reference to anything outside the will or the protection of God. When God takes us into this deep and dark ravine he does not abandon us. Although we may not know where we are going, or how long the journey will take, because YHWH is our shepherd we know that at some point we will emerge to find another green pasture where we lack nothing, and where we might stop and rest.

In the last half of verse 4, the author elaborates a bit further about the reason why we should not fear. "*For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*" The shepherd is with us. He guides us, and leads us. He also protects and comforts us. The shepherd carries with him his "rod" (a weapon about the size and shape of a police baton), and his staff (a heavy walking stick) which he uses to guide and direct the sheep. The shepherd's rod and staff point to YHWH's presence, guidance, and protection.⁵ If YHWH leads us into and directs us through this valley, then we have no reason to be afraid. "*For you are with me.*" In fact, only YHWH can lead us through the valley of the shadow of death, because all others (friends and family) must turn back, and we would be on our own, left to ourselves.⁶ YHWH is

⁴ Kidner, Psalms 1-72, 110-111.

⁵ VanGemeren, Psalms, Vol. 5., 254.

⁶ Kidner, Psalms 1-72, 111.

with us every step of the way as he leads us through this valley of the shadow of death.

As we move into the second (and final) section of the Psalm (vv. 5-6), the scene shifts from the protection of our shepherd while we are in the valley of shadows, to an even more personal and intimate scene, that of table fellowship. In the ancient world, to eat with someone at table was to form a bond with them. This is why covenants were ratified with a fellowship meal, and this explains why the Pharisees were so upset when Jesus ate with sinners (IRS agents and prostitutes). When Jesus ate with sinners, he was identified with them. The importance of table fellowship also explains why Jesus ate his last supper with the disciples, transforming the celebration of the Jewish Passover into the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Therefore, it is quite remarkable that in the closing verses of this Psalm, we are said to be YHWH's own guest at the table himself has prepared for us. The trials, fears, and uncertainty of the journey through the valley of shadows has given way to a fellowship meal in the presence of YHWH.

As we are told in verse 5, "*you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*" Not only is YHWH our host, we are the guest of honor at his table, where nothing is lacking. No expense has been spared. YHWH has prepared this table which is filled with the finest of food and drink. The cup which overflows is a picture of YHWH providing us with the best of all things, as in the green pasture and the still waters mentioned previously. YHWH even anoints the honored guest with a sweet olive oil, an ancient ritual by which the host welcomes his guest into the banquet hall.⁷ While we dine at YHWH's table and receive his gracious provision for all of our needs, our enemies are witnesses. This is a picture of God's power over them, ruling over them and subduing them. YHWH protects us from our enemies because we are in his presence. In this we also see the vindication of YHWH's ways and purposes. We are honored guests of God himself. YHWH's enemies (and ours) are on the outside looking in.

In light of this image of blessing in the presence of the Lord, David draws the following conclusion in verse 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.*" The place where we see God's goodness and mercy on display is in that covenant he has made with sinners, promising to redeem them. What makes the table in the presence of the Lord such a wonderful and comforting thing is not the abundance of it all (important as that is) but because we experience God's goodness and mercy firsthand. While our enemies can only watch, we are reminded of God's faithfulness toward his people, God's goodness and mercy follow me ("are with me"), all the days of my life (and even while I am in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death).

Because a covenantal bond has been established by YHWH with sinners (evident and ratified by the image of table fellowship with YHWH himself), we can be assured of God's everlasting favor. God's people (his sheep) will dwell in his house forever. This he has promised, and this he will do. The promise that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, is the Old Testament equivalent of Paul's assertion in Romans 8:37-39. "*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.*" And all of this is true because God is "my shepherd."

⁷ VanGemeren, Psalms, Vol. 5., 255.

In John 10:1-18 we learn the identity of this shepherd who leads us to green pastures and who is with us as we pass through the valley of the shadow of death. In Revelation 7:9-17 we see the same banquet scene David's describes in Psalm 23 in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In John 10, Jesus is engaged in a heated discussion with the Pharisees, and has just told them that they remain in their sins. In verse 1 of John 10, Jesus takes up the subject of the good shepherd, doing so against the backdrop of the 23rd Psalm and a number of references throughout the prophets where YHWH is said to be the shepherd of Israel. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."* . . . *All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* Everything of which we read in the 23rd Psalm Jesus now applies to himself. Jesus is that shepherd of whom David was speaking. Jesus is the one who leads us to green pastures. Jesus is the one who gives us life abundant (i.e., the image of the over-flowing cup).

In verses 14-15 (and following) Jesus goes on to say, *"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."* As David referred to YHWH as "my shepherd" so Jesus reminds us that he knows his own and his own know him. Everything affirmed of the shepherd in the shepherd's Psalm is fulfilled by the life and death of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus is my shepherd because I know him (through faith) and he knows me, because he has redeemed me from my sins.

The shepherd theme appears again in Revelation 7:9-17 (our New Testament lesson) where John recounts his vision of all those redeemed by Jesus Christ, and for whom he laid down his life. *"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"* John sees the people who dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Goodness and mercy have followed them, and their enemies (who put the martyrs to death) are nowhere to be seen.

John continues his description of the heavenly scene. *"And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.' Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'"* John sees those who have passed through the valley of the shadow of death. Their shepherd has been with them every step of the way. He has brought them safely through this dreaded valley. They are clothed in white robes, the guilt of their sin washed away.

Says John, *"therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst*

anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” The lamb who laid down his life for our sins is the good shepherd of the 23rd Psalm. We hunger and thirst no more because Jesus has led this uncountable multitude into the greenest of pastures, to the still waters of the river of life, and to that table prepared for us in the presence of the Lord. Never again will we hunger or thirst. We will find rest in the shade of God’s goodness, the terror of the shadow of death long gone. It is here that God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Because Jesus is my shepherd, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever and his goodness and mercy will follow me.