

A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Psalm 23:1-6

The 23rd Psalm is undoubtedly one of the most well-known passages in the entire Bible. Of all the psalms in the Bible, the 23rd Psalm is the best-loved of all of them -- not to mention it's the most-memorized. It's a poem with no peer and has been called “the sweetest song ever sung.” In this way it could be compared to John Newton's “Amazing Grace” in that its words are known by many who have no connection to the Christian faith. We love this Psalm because it is so personal and individual, and because it speaks so tenderly about life. It is read at funerals to comfort the sorrowing, at hospital beds to encourage the suffering, to the hurting who have run aground on the discouragements of life. We read it and we love it because it is a psalm of confidence -- a song of trust and confidence in God.

Psalm 23 is called the Shepherds Psalm, because it portrays God as a good Shepherd, a Shepherd who cares for and looks after this flock. King David wrote this psalm - and if anyone was qualified to describe God in this manner, it was David. We know from the Bible that David had been a shepherd before he became a king, and so David had a pretty good idea of what a shepherd was like. How often he must have gazed up at the heavens on those star-filled nights while he was out watching over his father's sheep, pondering the very heart and nature of God. His years of shepherding had taught him that a shepherd was the best description of what God does for his people. Unfortunately, we live in a culture and in a society where tending sheep is not your ordinary occupation. I would doubt most of us, if any of us knows someone or anyone who actually makes their living as a shepherd. I have had some experience as I was herdsman (shepherd) for a herd of Holstein cows for a while and Nancy and I managed (shepherded) a small herd of dairy goats on our farm. But there are some differences in that cows and goats are not sheep – and God's Word tells us we are much more like sheep.

Since this psalm is so familiar, and because it's set in the little know world of sheep and shepherds, we face the danger of missing the depth of its meaning. The richness of the significance and the implications of this Psalm can slide from our minds right past our hearts if we are not careful. But David wrote this Psalm out of his shepherd's heart and since the Bible refers to God's people as sheep nearly two hundred times it's important to read the psalm in context as the two main characters in this psalm are the shepherd and his sheep. This psalm is about God (shepherd) and about God's people (the sheep) – but it is also about Jesus (the Good Shepherd) and Christians (the sheep). In the 23rd Psalm this morning we find three great affirmations of God's shepherd heart for His people.

I. First, we see God's shepherd heart for His people in His provision. “*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake*” (Psalm 23:1-3). In these words we see four ways in which God's shepherding provides for His people:

1) Our God the Shepherd provides contentment. “*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*” This tells us that since God is our shepherd we will not lack anything that's good and necessary. A Sunday School teacher asked his class, “How many of you can quote Psalm 23?” Several of the children raised their hands, including a little four year old girl. The teacher was surprised that someone so young would know the 23rd Psalm so he asked her to recite it for the class. She stood up and said, “The Lord is my shepherd. *That's all I want.*” While her words were mixed up, her surely heart was not.

Brothers and sisters, if Jesus is your shepherd, everything else should be secondary. We could say it this way: "If the Lord is my shepherd, then I shall not want. So therefore, if I am in want, then I am not letting the Lord be my shepherd." Psalm 34:9 says: "*Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack!*" When God is our shepherd all of our needs are taken care of. The truth is, most often our *wants* find their source in our personal *desires* instead of our real *needs*. True contentment is not having everything you want. True contentment is wanting everything you already have in God.

When someone says, "I shall not want," we need to sit up and take notice because we live in an age and times of discontentment. Jason Lehman wrote this about contentment:

It was spring. But it was *summer* I wanted - The warm days, and the great outdoors.
It was summer. But it was *fall* I wanted - The colorful leaves, and the cool, dry air.
It was fall. But it was *winter* I wanted - The beautiful snow, and the joy of the holiday season.
It was winter. But it was *spring* I wanted - The warmth, and the blossoming of nature.
I was a child. But it was *adulthood* I wanted - The freedom, and the respect.
I was 20. But it was *30* I wanted - To be mature, and sophisticated.
I was middle-aged. But it was *20* I wanted - The youth, and the free spirit.
I was retired. But it was *middle-age* I wanted - The presence of mind, without limitations.
Then my life was over, and I never got what I wanted.

In a cemetery in England there's a gravestone that reads with this inscription: "She died for want of things." Alongside that stone is another, which reads, "He died trying to give them to her." The age of discontentment we live in today has been called the "prison of want." Many today are prisoners to their wants of something bigger or nicer or thinner or faster. If your happiness comes from something you deposit, drive, drink, or digest, then you're in the prison of want. If you hoping for a change in circumstance that will bring you happiness - you are in prison cell of discontentment. The power of "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*" comes from the reality that - *what we have in our shepherd is greater than anything we do and do not have in life*. Amen? God provides contentment!

2) Our God the Shepherd also *provides nourishment*. "*He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.*" Notice that the shepherd "*makes*" us lie down. Josephus, a first century scholar, wrote that sometimes the shepherd would institute forced rest periods for his sheep, especially for the pregnant ewes and baby lambs. The shepherd would take the sheep and fold their legs in such a way that they would become paralyzed for a while and therefore had to lie down and get their much-needed rest. Now some of us have been made to lie down because of some issue or problem. Know that means the shepherd has slowed us down, made us lie down for a reason. Shepherds would "*make*" their sheep take forced times of rest, but they could only do so when four conditions were met:

- a) Sheep rest when they have *freedom from fear*. By nature, sheep are nervous and fearful. When they know the shepherd is with them, they can relax. In Isaiah 43:5 God says: "*Fear not, for I am with you.*" We are at rest when we are free from fear.
- b) Sheep rest when they have *freedom from friction*. If there is friction in the flock, sheep can't sleep. Instead of lying down, they are up pushing against one another. The shepherd minimizes the tension by making them lie down. We are at rest when we are free from the friction of tension.
- c) Sheep rest when they have *freedom from frustrations*. Things like gnats and flies and parasites can distract sheep and keep them from lying down. A good shepherd keeps an eye out for irritations that can frustrate a flock. We are at rest when we are free from frustration.

d) Sheep rest when they have *freedom from famine*. A hungry sheep is forever on its feet, looking around, foraging for food. But the shepherd makes sure that they are in “*green pastures*,” where they can feed among the rich, sweet grass. We are at rest when we are free when we are well fed.

But some of us sheep never slow down enough to chew on the green pastures of God’s Word. We’re either filled with fear or we’re in friction with other sheep or we allow the small frustrations of life to knock us off center and we don’t get to eat and digest the richness and sweetness of God’s Word. God wants us to lie down in the midst the busyness of life and chew on the abundance of the truth of His Living Word. A sheep that is lying down in the meadows of the Master has no worries. This is good news in a society where so many are filled with anxiety today. Studies tell us that as many as 25% of us don’t get enough sleep because of stress and anxiety. But Philippians 4:6 tells us: “*do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*”

After being fully fed, the sheep are then quietly watered: “*He leads me beside still waters.*” Sheep by nature are afraid of running water and will refuse to drink unless everything is still and quiet, and so shepherds would often divert water from a rushing river to make a private pool of refreshment. But even with the quiet waters available the shepherd has to lead the sheep to the good water because otherwise they will stop and drink from polluted puddles where they can pick up parasites. As God’s sheep we often do the same. God provides pure, quiet water and yet we often drink from places that will only harm us. In his book *Traveling Light* Max Lucado puts it this way: “With His own pierced hands, Jesus created a pasture for the soul. He tore out the thorny underbrush of condemnation. He pried loose the boulders of sin. In their place He planted seeds of grace and dug ponds of mercy.”

3) Our God the Shepherd also provides restoration. “*He restores my soul.*” Because sheep are careless, curious, and cantankerous creatures, they often need to be restored. The word, “*restore*” here means to “bring back to a former or normal state, to make new.” Sheep are naturally prone to independence and wandering, and so can get lost faster than any other animal. As a result they may fall and get hurt or get attacked by a predator, or they may simply tip over, and become what is known as “cast down.” This is a term for a sheep that is lying flat on its back, with its feet flailing in the air. Often sheep that are too fat, or have too much wool, will lie down in a little depression in the ground and then, when their center of gravity changes, they’ll actually tip over and are unable to get back up.

When sheep are missing, often a shepherd will look for those who are cast down. Buzzards and vultures and coyotes know that a cast down sheep is easy pickings and quick easy meal. When the shepherd finds the sheep, he rolls it over and lifts it to its feet. He then straddles the sheep, holding it erect, rubbing the limbs to restore circulation, while gently talking to it. What a picture of what God does for those who stray from His presence. God is the God of the second chances. Following Christ is a series of new beginnings, as it is our sinful nature to wander and be cast down. If you’re cast down today, allow the Shepherd to restore your soul. He will pick you and put you back up on your feet.

4) Fourthly, our God the Shepherd also provides guidance. “*He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*” The word used for “*paths*” refers to a “well-defined and well-worn trail.” Here’s more evidence of how stupid sheep really are: even when the path is perfectly clear, sheep will still stray. Since the shepherd knows the trails, he can guide them in the best way. God longs to lead us in paths of righteousness. Most of us know the right road we should take but our selfishness and sinfulness often lead us astray. We need the shepherd to guide us in the right way because like sheep, we often go in the wrong direction. As we submit to the shepherd He will lead us in paths of righteousness. He will do so for the sake of His name – for His glory. God guides us for His sake, not for ours. His reputation is at stake not ours. His purposes are accomplished when we follow Him down the proper paths of His righteousness. We can see God’s shepherd heart in His provision of contentment, nourishment, restoration and guidance.

II. Second, we see God's shepherd heart for His people not only in His provision but also in *His protection*. "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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil" (Psalm 23:4-5). God's shepherd heart can be seen in the provision in verses 1-3, but now when we come to verse 4, we notice a shift, a change of context. In verses 1-3, the sheep are in the sunshine. In verse 4, the sheep are now in the shadows. God not only takes care of us by providing contentment, nourishment, restoration and guidance - He also guides us through the dark seasons of life.

Notice also that the pronouns change here. In the first half, David praises the virtues of the Shepherd, using "He" and "His" to refer to God. Now, when we come to the second half, he speaks to the Shepherd more directly: "you are with me, your rod and your staff . . . you prepare . . . you anoint." When times got tough, God became more personal, more real to David. It does seem, doesn't it, that real intimacy with God seems to come mostly through times of suffering and pain. It's during times of deep gloom and despair that we most often see God's shepherd heart of His protection. It's then that we realize that God is still with us - because *God's protection is His presence*. God's Word tells us the three we need not fear when we walk from the green pastures of life into the shadows of death.

1) Because God is with us - we need not fear death. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." The picture here is of the shepherd leading his sheep back home in the evening. As they go through the rocky ravines and narrow gorges, long dark shadows creep and dance across the trail, frightening the flock. The shepherd knows from experience that predators like bears and wolves or lions can take cover in the cliffs as they wait in ambush for some fresh meat. Notice it says that we walk "through" the valley. We don't have to stay in the valley brothers and sisters. When we are truly following Jesus, we are just passing through the valleys of life because in Christ there is brightness beyond the darkness, glory beyond the gloom.

David continues, "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." The "rod" was a club that hung from the shepherd's belt. It was used to protect the sheep. Shepherds were very adept in their aim and would throw this club at attacking animals. The "staff" was a slender pole, with a little crook on the end. It could be hooked around the leg of a sheep to pull him from harm. It was also used to direct the flock, and occasionally to discipline the sheep. Not once do we read of sheep carrying rods and staffs. Sheep must rely completely on the shepherd for safety and direction. Likewise, we must lean on the Lord for all that we need and find comfort in his protection and His discipline. When the sheep could see the rod and the staff, they knew that they were protected. They could walk through dark valleys as long as the shepherd was with them. Jesus said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

2) Because God is with us - we need not fear danger. In verse 5, David writes, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." While it has been suggested that David is switching metaphors here to that of a gracious dinner host, I'm not willing to stray too far from the context of shepherd and sheep. A closer look gives us a picture David would have used. Ideally, the best place for the sheep to graze is on a flat mesa, or "table-like" land. A common expression among shepherds of Jesus' day was "preparing the pasture" which meant before letting the sheep run free, a good shepherd took some time and inspected the area for poisonous plants and makes sure there weren't any predators prowling around. The sheep could then eat and rest even though there might be enemies nearby because the shepherd had prepared the pasture on the flat table-like land in the presence of possible dangerous plants or animals. The presence of God as our Shepherd does the same for us. He goes before us and sovereignly "prepares the pasture" for us ahead of time. What that means is that anything and everything that happens to us in life is according to God's purpose, plan and will. Acts 17:28 tells us that "In him we live and move and have our being." Colossians 1:17 says that Jesus "is before all things, and in him all things hold together." We should never fear danger - God is with us!

3) Because God is with us - we need not fear any difficulty. *"You anoint my head with oil."* In David's day a generous host would anoint the foreheads of his guests with expensive and fragrant oil. This would help neutralize body odor and the smells that cling to us in everyday life. In our culture, it would be like giving each guest a stick of deodorant when they came to your house. Not sure how that would go over in our days of tolerance and political correctness. In David's day, and in days and culture in which Jesus lived, this was not an affront as oil was also a sign of acceptance and rejoicing. To be anointed with oil was to be splashed with joy! While that may shed some light on the meaning of this text, again I believe David is still writing in the context of the sheep and shepherd relationship.

In ancient Israel shepherds used oil for three purposes. One purpose for oil was as a covering to repel insects. Sheep do have a real problem with bugs. Flies like to deposit their eggs into the tender membrane of the sheep's nose. When the eggs would hatch, larvae would drive the sheep insane, causing them to beat their heads against rocks and trees, or shake their heads up and down for hours. The shepherd knew what flies could do so he covered their noses with oil as a repellent. Another use for oil was used as a means to prevent conflict. Often rams injure themselves as they butted heads in their battle to win the affection of the ewes. Whenever the shepherd would hear two rams say to the same female sheep, "I want ewe, babe" (think about it) he knew there was going to be trouble. So the shepherd would then quickly smear oil over the noses and heads of the gladiators so they would glance off each other rather than splitting their heads open.

Another use for oil was to heal wounds. Sheep in flocks gets a lot of wounds and cuts simply from living in a pasture. They get pricked by thorns and scrapped by sharp rocks. Oil served as an ointment to protect their sores from getting infected. Anointing with oil is a picture of God's shepherd heart for His people in His protection. He deals with our difficulties by protecting us from those things that can hurt us. He helps us have harmony with one another. And He comforts us and heals us when we're beat up. As sinners living in a fallen world, we are wounded sheep in need of a healing shepherd. Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd, our Great Physician, our Savior. He is with us. He is our protection.

III. Third, and lastly we see God's shepherd heart for His people not only in His provision and protection but - also in His promises. *"My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."* Because of God's protection we don't have to fear death or danger or difficulties. Instead we can embrace His promises. We read of two ways we can see God's shepherd heart for His people in His promises.

1) God has promised to bless us with more than we presently need. *"My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."* There are two possible meanings to the phrase *"My cup overflows."* The first meaning comes from the culture of middle-eastern hospitality where dinner hosts would serve drinks in cups. Filling the cup was a common way to tell your guests that they could stay as long as they wanted. When the host really enjoyed the company of the person, he filled the cup to overflowing. He kept pouring and pouring until the liquid ran over the edge of the cup and onto the floor. But when a cup sat empty, the host was hinting that it was time to leave.

The other meaning, again from the context of shepherd and sheep, comes from the fact that shepherds often carried water to drink and would share it with his sheep when they needed it. This seems to fit the context of what follows: *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."* John 4:10-14 tells us in the midst our spiritual thirst Jesus is our *"living water."* In Christ God's goodness and loving faithfulness will follow us forever. The word *"follow"* literally means, "to pursue." God pursues us to bless us with His *"mercy"*, His loving faithfulness. The word *"mercy"* here is one of the most important words to a Hebrew – *"khesed"* – which contains the idea of God's loving, covenantal faithfulness towards us. This word is normally translated as "lovingkindness" or "steadfast love." But the translators here use *"mercy"* to point out an essential aspect of God's lovingkindness.

If God gave us only justice, we all would be condemned and punished for our disobedient wandering. But in Jesus God has faithfully fulfilled His promise to love us with His mercy. “*Khesed*” is the faithful promise of a loving God to His people. God’s goodness and mercy led Jesus to the cross, where the shepherd gave his life for his sheep. In drinking the cup of death, Jesus lovingly poured out the overflow of his goodness and mercy onto needy sheep-like people. But God’s “*khesed*” – his “*mercy*” – even goes beyond that. His blessings go far beyond on needs in that he gives us more than we deserve.

2) God has also promised He will bless us with more than we’ll ever need in the future. “*And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*” In Christ we have more than we need right now and we’ll have everything we need for eternity. This psalm began with “*The Lord is my shepherd*” and closes with “*I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*” The sheep have been following the shepherd to green pastures and through shadowy valleys. The seasons have changed and they are now coming home. The flock is now ready to joyfully winter in the arms of the Good Shepherd’s eternally green pasture.

A famous actor with a wonderful voice was once asked by an old preacher to recite 23rd Psalm. The actor agreed on the condition that the preacher would recite it also. The actor stood up and gave a dramatic presentation of the psalm with wonderful intonation and modulation. Everyone stood and applauded wildly. The pastor then stood up and in a very rough voice, broken from many years of preaching, quoted the 23rd Psalm from memory. When he finished no one stood and clapped, instead almost everyone sat quietly in tears. When asked the reason for the difference in reactions, the actor replied: “Well, while I might have known the words of the Psalm, the pastor knows the shepherd.”

Do you know the 23rd Psalm or do you know the Shepherd? Jesus said: “*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*” (John 10:14-15). Jesus spoke of those who know him: “*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*” (John 10:3-4).

Jesus is our Shepherd who leads us. In Luke 9:23 he said, “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*” When you intimately know the Shepherd you will seek to stay close to him. You will follow his voice. At times it will be through green pastures. At other times it will be through dark valleys. But either way the Shepherd is with us. He has a plan and purpose for your life, for my life, for our lives, for the life of this church - and he wants to lead us all into His paths of righteousness, for our good and for His glory.

One thing that happens when you read this psalm is that you can only read so far with your eyes, mind and mouths before you begin to speak to God from your heart. The theology of “*He leads me*” turns personal into “*You are with me.*” Yes, it’s often in the tough times when we turn to Psalm 23 and we are drawn closer to the Shepherd. That is also true for us as a whole. We are God’s people, we are His sheep, He is our Shepherd, and when Jesus came into the world he was called “*Immanuel (which means, God with US)*” (Matthew 1:23). May we each and all together live out the reality that *God is with us!*

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.
Amen. Hebrews 13:20-21

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