

## Psalm 23

Good Shepherd, April 14, 2024  
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

***The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. <sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. <sup>3</sup> He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. <sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.***

Sheep are stupid. They're obstinate, they don't listen very well, and they're very hard to take care of because of this. Sheep are hard to please, hard to make comfortable, and they spook very easily. And that is a problem for Shepherds because they say that the only way to get a sheep to eat or to get a sheep to lie down and to rest is for it to be totally comfortable, to be totally at peace and unafraid.

And thinking about these character traits of sheep, it makes perfect sense that all throughout Scripture God uses the imagery of sheep as a description of *us*. You know, we're kind of dumb too. We are easily spooked, we get afraid and anxious over so many little things, and it's very hard to make us lie down and rest, very hard to make us feel at peace. Isn't that true?

Think just in terms of physical things, finding peace regarding our physical needs. Maybe you recognize this in yourself, or maybe you can think of times when this was true for you, I certainly can for myself. There have been many times in my life when I thought that "once I get to this point in my life, then everything will be good." Or maybe you've felt that way about *things*—a new car, a new house, a new toy, a new job—we can often convince ourselves that once we get that *thing* that we think we so desperately need, then we'll never be lacking again! And of course, it doesn't work out that way, does it? There's always something *more* that we want, that we think that we need, another point in life that we want to reach, and it all just makes us so restless.

And we're constantly discontent! Sometimes we don't have enough food and we're hungry. Other times we eat too much and feel bloated and think we need to start a diet. Sometimes it's too hot, and other times it's too cold. Sometimes there's not enough rain, and other times there's too much rain, and we're tired of being cooped up inside. We are never at peace, never content.

And here's the reality of the situation: even if we had *all* of our physical wants met completely—if we were rich and we lived in San Diego with perfect weather every day, and we had everything we could possibly want along with a wonderful family, a wonderful job, all that stuff—*still*, we wouldn't be able to lie down. We wouldn't even come close. And the reason for that is that we as humans have a need that is *much greater* than anything that is physical. The ancient church father St. Augustine once said, "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You." Nothing can replace that. Nothing can make us rest or lie down in peace and contentment *except for* this relationship with our Father—peace with Him through the forgiveness of sins.

Sadly, even though all people *have* this need, *most* people (including us at times) don't go to the right places to satisfy it. Sheep constantly eat the wrong kind of food and drink the wrong kind of water. I was reading this book about Psalm 23 written by a shepherd who talked about how vigilant a shepherd needs to be in pulling out poisonous weeds and inspecting watering holes, because sheep will eat and drink anything they come across, even if it would kill them. And we're the same way!

There's so much in this world that we sometimes turn to for comfort to satisfy that restlessness, to fill that gnawing pit within us that only God can satisfy. We'll turn to food, we'll turn to entertainment, we'll turn to relationships, we'll turn to nature; and we'll think about these things as "soul food," as being good for the soul. And it's true that those things can be *good*, but they're not "good for the soul"; they can't fix the problem that our *souls* have. Only *God* can do that. And that's why David writes, "***The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down.***" That's what our Good Shepherd does. As difficult as a task that it is, He is uniquely qualified to get us to lie down, because He's the one who laid down His life and rose again.

Now, when David writes about not wanting for anything, he *is* including physical things that God provides. It's a very small portion of the type of peace that he's describing in this Psalm, but it *is* included. God is the Father of lights from whom every good and perfect gift comes. (cf. James 1:17) God promises to give us our daily bread, and He does! As long as we are in this world, God provides for our every need. And so often, He who clothes the lilies of the field in glorious splendor gives us far more than just daily bread. (cf. Matthew 6:25-34) He pours out an abundance upon us.

Nevertheless, if you took all the wonderful, physical blessings that God provides and put them over here on a scale, and then you put even the smallest of the spiritual blessings that God provides over here—the spiritual would *far* outweigh the physical. The spiritual gifts that God gives are far, *far* more important. And *that* is what David is primarily talking about when he says, "***I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.***" He's talking about God's Word. God's Word is the verdant, beautiful green pasture that our soul needs to feed upon. That is the calm, cool, still water that is given to quench our spiritual thirst.

Jesus *often* spoke of the Word in this way. He said in the Gospel of John, "***I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.***" (John 6:35) He says later in the same chapter, "***The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.***" (v. 51) He's talking about the Word that tells us about how *He* gave His life for *us*. He also said in the verses after our Gospel reading, "***My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.***" (John 10:27) That's the most important thing for us sheep. For us to hear the Shepherd's voice with which He calls out to us and teaches us everything we need to know. To hear our Shepherd's voice with which He tells us that we *have* peace with God through the forgiveness of sins *because* He died and rose again. It is *in* this message of salvation that we find those calm green pastures.

Now, if you jump down to verse five, David again describes the feast of God's Word, but he also ramps up the intensity in the second half of the Psalm. Whereas in verse two, he says that God is our Shepherd feeding us in these picturesque pastures and waters, in verse five, he says, "***You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.***"

He's describing a feast—God, laying out a table with rich, delicious food. And the oil, well that's something that the Israelites would put on their face and head at a feast. And the cup overflowing with wine shows you just how abundant this feast is. And again, the food, the feast is God's Word—the message of the forgiveness of sins that our souls so desperately need. So, the picture is *similar* in both verses two and five: God feeds us abundantly on exactly what we need.

But here in verse five, he gives that to us in a completely different setting. Instead of the peaceful,

green pastures, here he says we eat, ***“in the presence of . . . enemies”***—surrounded by enemies. Imagine you’re standing on a battlefield in World War II. And there are huge artillery shells falling and exploding all around you, and there are bullets whizzing past your face, and you sit down and have a picnic right in the middle of all of that. That’s the picture that David is describing, and it doesn’t *seem* calm or peaceful at all. But his point is this: “Look, even if I have nothing, physically—if I am surrounded by enemies on every side, if *all* of the physical blessings and comforts are taken away, I still am fed on this wondrous banquet of God’s Word.” And so even in that uneasy setting, he is still able to lie down and sleep, *simply* because, ***“The LORD is my Shepherd. I shall not want.”*** I shall not want, I shall not be in need, because whatever it is that I *need*, the Lord promises to provide.

And He also promises to protect. You know, sheep need lots of protection because they love to wander. It happens when sheep are being led from one place to another. The shepherd will lead his flock from one pastureland to another, and he knows the way to go. He knows the right path that will be safe for the sheep, but the sheep *love* to wander off in different directions and into danger.

And again, that’s a perfect description of us. We know the way we *should* go; we know how God has called us to live. He gives us His law, the Ten Commandments to show us how we *ought* to respond in any situation. And He doesn’t give these to us just to restrict us, with them comes great blessing. Take, for instance, the Fourth Commandment, ***“Honor your father and mother . . . that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”*** (Ephesians 6:2-3) *If* we were to focus our hearts on loving God and our neighbor, then we would most certainly get along better in life than if we were to only love ourselves. And yet, love for ourselves is *exactly* what we prioritize. So, we know the way our Shepherd is leading us, yet we wander. We head off in our own direction; following our own desires we are enticed, and left to ourselves, we would plunge off the cliff and right into hell.

But we have a Shepherd who protects us from this. Verse three says, ***“He restores my soul.”*** The word there is the same word that is often translated, “Repent.” And in this form, it means, “He causes me to turn back, He causes me to repent.” Our Good Shepherd, through His Word, comes after us. Like the parable of the Shepherd who left the ninety-nine sheep and went after the one; every time we wander, He comes after us to call us back, to cause us to repent of our sin, to repent of our foolish wanderings, and to restore our souls by forgiving our sins through His blood. ***“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned-- every one-- to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*** (Isaiah 53:6) Through this, ***“He restores my soul.”***

So, that’s one way in which our Savior protects us; He protects us from our own sinful nature, forgiving us when we stray. But then the next way that David says God protects us might not seem very protective. ***“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.”*** Notice what David means here: *as* our Shepherd *leads* us and *guides* us, He not only leads us *through* the dark valleys, He actually leads us *to* the dark valleys—which again, doesn’t seem very protective. These places are ***“the valley of the shadow of death.”*** Another way that phrase could be translated is, “the valley of the deep shadow.”

There’s a whole bunch of examples of this shadowy valley from each of our lives. If you lose your job—that’s a valley of shadow. If you have a relationship that is broken—that’s a valley of shadow. And of course, the greatest example of this deep shadowy-dark valley that every Christian goes

through is death—both our own and the death of our loved ones. If you’ve stood at the casket of someone you love—of a family member, a spouse—that’s a deep shadow. I think of my parents who lost their third child. His name is Noah, he is the twin of my younger brother Nathan that some of you have met. They were born three months prematurely, and immediately Noah suffered a brain bleed. And when the doctors knew he was going to die, my parents were given just a few moments to be with him and to look at him and to take in his features. That’s a deep shadow. What a dark valley to never see him grow, to never hear him laugh, to never hug him as he cried.

David himself knew that kind of sorrow. *His* son had died seven days after he had been born, and to add onto that pain, it was *because* of David’s sin that his son had died. Then two of David’s other sons eventually rebelled against him, one even tried to kill him. What a valley of despair! What a shadowy darkness! And so, we have to ask two questions here: **1)** First of all, *why* would the Good Shepherd *lead* us into such a dark valley? **2)** Secondly, how could David, *in* such a dark valley, say, **“I will fear no evil.”** Well, let’s answer the second question first, since David explains: **“For you are with me.”**

That is the most significant phrase in this whole Psalm. You see, in the first three verses, David’s been speaking in the third person. **“The Lord is my Shepherd,”** “He does this, He does that.” But now, David stops talking *about* God and starts speaking directly *to* God. **“You are with me.”** You see, David knows that in those dark valleys—in those worst moments of His life—He knows from the promises of God’s Word that the Good Shepherd is close enough to him that he can say, **“You,”** and not just, **“He.”**

And we know that too! In those dark moments, in those deep valleys, when we don’t know what to do or what to say or even what to pray, we can just say, **“You...You are with me.”** “You who led me here, You who protect me, You who provide for me, You who have rod and staff to keep me safe from every danger, You who want to lead me on to those halls of heaven, You who walked through the deepest, darkest valley that anyone has ever known and did it alone, bearing the sin of the world and laying down Your life for the wandering sheep—You then rose again so that You are here with me every step of the way. So *close* that I can say, **“You,”** and not just, **“He.”**

This is the wonderful promise that we have in our Good Shepherd because of His death and His resurrection, a hope that David shared. And it’s a hope that also answers the other question: **“Why would the Good Shepherd *lead* us into such a dark valley?”** The answer to that question is the same as the answer to that old joke: **“Why did the chicken cross the road?”** **“To get to the other side.”** And that’s truly the reason. Jesus leads us to these dark valleys because we’re in a world full of sin and evil. And by leading us *through* them, He teaches us that He is with us. Because nowhere do we learn more clearly how much it means for us that Christ has died and is risen again than when we stand in those dark valleys where the only hope and the only comfort is that **“You are with me.”**

And that is something we can say in any circumstance and in every situation, since **“surely [God’s] 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 this total and complete and never-ending care, we can lie down in green pastures, we can drink from still waters, we can sit in the middle of a battlefield at peace. We can walk through those dark, shadowy valleys and fear no evil, since our Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep and rose again is with us always, working even evil out for our eternal good. Therefore, we can say, **“The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.”** Amen.