

Summer In The Psalms - Psalm 23

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I. Introduction to Psalm 23

A. After we have digested the drama of Psalm 1 & 2, the question becomes how can the redeemed walk in the righteous way, knowing that the nations are raging and aligning against Jesus? The answer is recognizing the chosen King is also the Good Shepherd.

B. It is safe to say that Psalm 23 is the psalm that the most people are familiar with. It is regularly read at funerals and referenced in popular settings. But it is far more than a popular psalm. It is the reality that all righteous people are living in and it is our surety to being able to walk on the righteous path.

C. Psalm 23 pictures the Lord as the leader, sustainer, provider, and protector of the life of the righteous, perhaps more than any other Psalm.

D. Spurgeon called Psalm 23 the “Pearl of the Psalms”. The challenge is that the familiarity many people have with Psalm 23 works against the wonder and power of the words written therein.

E. There is no doubt that when Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd in John 10:11, in the Jewish mind He was associating Himself with the Shepherd of Psalm 23. Consider it, when Jesus was telling them, I am the good shepherd who lays His life down for the sheep, He was saying, “You’ve read the 23 rd Psalm, that Psalm is talking about me!”

F. There are many ways commentators break down Psalm 23. I like to see it in three parts:

- Vs. 1 – 3 David is speaking Instructively
- Vs. 4 – 5 David is speaking Intimately
- Vs. 6 David is speaking Contemplatively

- This progression follows a clear path of from learning truth about God to growing in personal communion with God to a final and settled confidence in God.

II. Instructively - Psalm 23:1-3

A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.

—Psalm 23:1-3

A. "The Lord is My Shepherd"

- Imagine David sitting on the Bethlehem hill side, feeling the weight of responsibility for his father's flock. These sheep were likely the primary means of provision for Jesse's household. Every day David led them to water and pasture. He protected them from predators, brought back the strays, kept watch over them so that none of them would be lost.
- One day a revelation lands on him, as I am the shepherd of this flock and the lives of these sheep are in my hands, the Lord is my shepherd, and my life is in His hands. As these sheep depend on me, I depend on Him. As they belong to my father, I belong to God.

B. "I Shall Not Want"

- The phrase 'I shall not want' is an idiomatic expression meaning, 'I am in need of nothing.' David is not claiming he possesses everything he could ever need; he is saying that because the Lord is his Shepherd, he knows everything necessary for life will be provided by His Shepherd in its proper time.
- I shall not want is a statement of confidence, peace, and rest in the knowledge of the shepherd's care. And why can he speak so definitively? Because David knows the responsibility of a shepherd. He knows that a good shepherd won't let his sheep

go without their needs being met. And if David was that committed to his father's sheep, how much more is the Good Shepherd committed to him!

C. "He Makes Me Lie Down in Green Pastures"

- Green pastures are not simply a beautiful environment. For a sheep green pastures are where sheep are fed, are free from threats, and are at rest.
- Considering the challenges of our day, the anxieties, fears, threats, and worries that have so defined the times we live in, we need to normalize the prayer, "Lord, make me lie down in green pastures."
- A sheep lying down in a green pasture doesn't have a care in the world.
- We are fed in the green pastures.

D. "He Leads Me Beside the Still Waters"

- Sheep are notoriously poor swimmers. Still waters are not only serene, but still waters are also essential for their safety. If sheep are led to rushing waters, they will be frightened and potentially be swept away and drowned.
- Still waters are a picture of safety. They are also the place of essential refreshment for sheep.
- As sheep by still waters is refreshed and satisfied.
- We are refreshed by the still waters.

E. "He Restores My Soul"

- The word restore literally means return. The restored soul is the soul that has returned to its place of trust, safety, security, and refreshing in the shepherd's care.
- The Shepherd restores the soul by bringing it back from wandering, fear, and anxiety into His presence.

F. “He Leads Me in Paths of Righteousness for His name’s sake”

- This is a beautiful call back to Psalm 1. Psalm 1 presents the way of the righteous and the way of sinners. Psalm 23 answers the question, “How can I know that I am staying on the path of the righteous?” It’s not up to us to just choose the path in our own strength, the Good Shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness. The blessed man of Psalm 1 delights in the Word of God, The sheep(the righteous man) of Psalm 23 follow God’s voice. The Word and the Spirit agree. This is how the Shepherd leads.
- “For His name’s sake” means that God shepherds His people in a manner consistent with His own character, reputation, and glory. He leads them rightly because that is who He is. His guidance reveals His goodness, His faithfulness, and His commitment to His people. A shepherd’s reputation is reflected in the condition of His flock.
- The word translated “paths” literally means “tracks”. The righteous way is a well-worn path of obedience to the shepherd’s lead. It’s the ancient paths of righteousness that He always leads His people in (Jer 6:16).

III. Intimately - Psalm 23:4-5

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

—Psalm 23:4-5

A. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil”

- The previous verse affirms God’s leadership on the well-worn paths of righteousness. Immediately in the next verse David acknowledges that His leadership may take him through the valley of the shadow of death, a place of deep darkness and possible peril.

- This is a gap for most believers. We imagine, if God is leading, the way will be easy. David is clear, You are leading me in righteous paths and at times that path may go through the darkest places. He affirms, even in this, I will not fear.

B. "For You are With Me."

- This is the turning point of the psalm. It's not just that God is a Shepherd. It's not just that He is providing. It's not just that He is sustaining. It's that He is with us.
- David's instruction in the first few verses turns into intimate conversation with the Lord. Everything he has said has been personal, but now the Lord is object of the conversation.
- Now the reasoning behind all He said in the first three verses becomes clear – all that God is and all that God does, He never does it from afar, as a shepherd is with His sheep, God is with us.
- Everything that David says in verse 4-5 actually happens in the valley. And what we find is that God transforms the valley from a place of darkness to a place of deep fellowship, honor, and abundance.
- We must digest the fact that the valley is where David moves from instruction to communion.

C. "Your Rod and Your Staff, They Comfort Me"

- The rod that shows up in Psalm 2 to dash the nations is now paired with a staff. The rod was used as a club of sorts to strike enemies that would try to destroy the sheep. The staff was used as an instrument of leadership to pull a wayward sheep back from going the wrong way.
- The very instrument that terrifies the enemies of God comforts the people of God. The sheep do not fear the rod because the rod is not aimed at them. The rod is aimed at what threatens them. The enemies of God experience the rod as judgment. The people of God experience the rod as protection.

D. "You Prepare a Table Before Me in the Presence of My Enemies" - Fellowship

- The table represents provision, but more than that, the table is the place of communion. In the ancient Near East when someone sat at your table, they were under your care, security, and protection.
- The table speaks of fellowship, acceptance, covenant, and safety. This all is provided by our shepherd in the presence of our enemies.
- We often look to leave the valley to get to the perfect place of "enemy-less existence" so that we can feast at the Lord's table. The Lord is unmoved by the presence of enemies. Remember He is the one who sits in the heavens and laughs at them.
- No, this place of rich fellowship is reserved for those who have followed the shepherd on the righteous path, into the dark valley. It's in that place that He offers His richest fare.

E. "You Anoint My Head with Oil"- Honor and Acceptance

- When a host welcomed an honored guest into their home it was a common custom to refresh the guest by anointing their head with oil. Jesus corrected Simon the pharisee in Luke 7 by telling him, "I entered your house...You did not anoint My head with oil..." (Luke 7:44-49).
- God is not leading us like lowly sheep; He is dignifying us as honored guests. We are to be seen as ones who belong in His presence, at His table. Even in the valley and while enemies are all around.
- And it's not only honor, dignity, and acceptance, it's refreshing and empowering

F. "My Cup Overflows" – Abundance and Joy

- This is an idiom. A cup that was "running over" is the cup that has been filled and refilled continually. It demonstrated generosity and abundance.

- We must accept the fact that in the valley the Lord wants to give abundant joy. The valley isn't the place of the absence of joy; it is often the place where the Lord give us the deepest joy.

IV. Contemplatively - Psalm 23:6

Psalm 23:6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

A. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life"

- David now reflects upon everything he has just declared about the Shepherd. In light of everything he has said, David arrives at a settled conclusion: surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.
- The word "surely" exudes certainty and confidence. The word "follow" is actually much stronger than simply coming behind. It means to pursue, chase after, or run down.
- The word translated mercy is the Hebrew word "chesed". It means God's loyal, covenant love.
- David is not saying that goodness and mercy are following along behind him. He is saying that God's goodness and covenant mercy are actively chasing him down everywhere the Shepherd leads.
- Throughout the psalm David has been following the Shepherd. Now he reveals that something has been following him. As he follows the Shepherd, goodness and mercy follow him. He cannot outrun them because they are sent by the Shepherd Himself.

B. "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever"

- This is the destination of the entire psalm. The goal was never merely green pastures, still waters, protection from enemies, or even an overflowing cup. The goal was always the presence of God in the house of God.

- Notice the progression. The Shepherd led him beside still waters, through paths of righteousness, through the valley of the shadow of death, and into fellowship at His table. Every step of the journey was leading David ultimately into the house of the Lord.
- Psalm 1 ends with two ways. Psalm 2 ends with the King. Psalm 23 ends with the house of the Lord. The blessed man who delights in God's Word and takes refuge in God's King ultimately finds himself dwelling in God's house forever.
- David began the psalm as a sheep in a field. He ends the psalm as a welcomed guest in the house of God. The Shepherd's ultimate purpose is not simply to care for His sheep but to bring them home.