

# PSALMS

## ***The Lord is Our Shepherd*** **Psalm 23**

This morning we are going to continue in our summer series through a few selected Psalms and today we are going to look at probably the most well-known psalm in the entire collection of 150 psalms. Even if you have never been to church and this is your first time this morning, you have probably heard this psalm read, perhaps at a funeral - Psalm 23

I want to just read it for us this morning, we'll pray, and then we will walk through it together...

### **Psalm 23:1-6**

**1** The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. **2** He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. **3** He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. **4** 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. **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.

Again, this is the most famous psalm of the lot, and for good reason. It brings a beautiful message wrapped in beautiful imagery. In fact, this is what Charles Spurgeon wrote about this psalm...

*It has been said that what the nightingale is among birds, that is this divine ode among the psalms, for it has sung sweetly in the ear of many a mourner in his night of weeping, and has bidden him hope for a morning of joy. I will venture to compare it also to the lark, which sings as it mounts, and mounts as it sings, until it is out of sight, and even then is not out of hearing...these are celestial notes, more fitted for the eternal mansions than for these dwelling places below the clouds. Oh that we may enter into the spirit of the psalm as we read it, and then we shall experience the days of heaven upon the earth! -The Treasury of David*

So, this morning we are going to spend some time listening to these “celestial notes,” and my hope is that if you are today in a “night of weeping” you can hear this psalm “bid you hope for a morning of joy.”

## **PRAYER**

Looking again at the psalm, we can summarize the main idea and theme here by the very first phrase...

### **I. The Lord is Our Shepherd**

#### **Psalm 23:1a**

**1** The Lord is my shepherd...

The entire psalm hangs on this phrase, because David is identifying two amazing truths about God. God is transcendent. And God is immanent.

And this is important, I think, because one of the reasons it is tempting to love this psalm so much is because we love what it says about us. We love to hear about the good gifts that God gives his sheep. And he does give good gifts, what this psalm describes really are the blessings of the sheep in God’s flock, but this psalm is not ultimately about the sheep. This psalm is first and foremost about the Shepherd, and it is in understanding this vision of the Shepherd that we are comforted as his sheep.

And so, again David speaks to the transcendence of God. By that, we mean that God is transcendent above his creation. God is separate from and independent of nature and humanity. God is superior to his creation in every way.

And the way David brings this up is in the name he uses to identify God here. In most English translations the name “Lord” there, is in all capital letters. And translators do that throughout the Old Testament when the Hebrew name, “Yahweh,” is used, rather than a general name like “God.”

Yahweh is God’s revealed personal name in Scripture. We see this in connection to Exodus 3 when Moses climbs Mt. Sinai to meet with God in the burning bush...

#### **Ex. 3:13-14**

**13** Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what

shall I say to them?" **14** God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you.'"

God said tell them Yahweh has sent you. The One who is and will be has sent you. Again, it is a name that is personal to God because it highlights his transcendence, it sets him apart from everyone else. No one else can claim that name, because no one else is the unchangeable, eternal, majestic, Creator, God of glory. In fact, the Jewish people believed, and many still do, that it was such a sacred name that they would not even dare to say it aloud.

God would say later through his prophet Isaiah...

**Is. 42:8**

I am the LORD (Yahweh); that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.

So, in Psalm 23 David starts out by writing, Yahweh, the transcendent God over all creation, that being, he is the one I'm writing about.

But then, in the same breath connects God's transcendence to God's immanence. By that we mean that though God is above and unlike his creation he is still active and present within his creation. That being, Yahweh, who stands above all, is not distant or apathetic or inactive. Rather, he acts as a shepherd.

Understand, the title of shepherd was not a highly respectable one. Shepherds were not upper class elites in the ancient world. And yet, David says the transcendent God is not ashamed to shepherd his people. Though God is infinitely holy, majestic, glorious, worthy of unending worship, he willingly takes the role of shepherd to care for his sheep.

And notice, David doesn't say that the Lord is **a** shepherd, as if he is one good option for us to choose from. He doesn't even say that the Lord is **our** Shepherd. Notice, the word "we" is not used anywhere here in this psalm. David is only using first person and second person pronouns here: you and me. David, in a moment of personal worship, says he, the LORD, is *my* shepherd.

Spurgeon, again, wrote this about that phrase...

*The sweetest word of the whole is that monosyllable, "My." He does not say, "The Lord is the shepherd of the world at large, and leadeth forth the multitude as his flock", but "The Lord is my shepherd;" if he be a Shepherd to no one else, he is a Shepherd to me; he cares for me, watches over me, and preserves me. -Spurgeon, Treasury of David*

This psalm has some beautiful imagery, but the most beautiful word is the word “my.”

When you become a parent and you have your first child, your life is completely changed (to put it mildly)...(for the good, I should add). You and your spouse now have this life you are responsible for. I remember the strangest feeling after my oldest daughter was born and it was time to bring her home from the hospital. She had kind of a rough start and spent a few days in the NICU, and so for those few days she had round the clock care from a team of trained and experienced nurses and doctors. By God’s grace and their skill, she improved and it was time to leave and it was kind of like, here she is, and we put her in the car seat and drove home. It was this overwhelming feeling that we were responsible for her life. I’m not a very defensive driver, I can be a bit aggressive sometimes, but I remember that drive home, I drove like I had 50 dozen eggs just laying the back of my car. I had my hands at 10 and 2, I was well under the speed limit, I was getting frustrated because I felt others around me were driving too fast and too close. I just felt overwhelmed with this responsibility to care for this new life.

And if you’ve had multiple children you also know that when you have your first, he/she gets all of your attention. She gets all the pictures, the new toys, the new clothes, the best food, she has all of your attention....but then if you have a second child, things tend to change a bit. You can’t give her all the attention, there is another one. And now we have four, and as our family has grown the harder it is for me to give my attention to each one as much as they need and deserve.

However, that is not a problem for God. If you have put your faith in Christ you stand alongside millions of others within the people of God, however, you are not lost in his flock. You are not one of the millions of people who call Christ their Savior begging for his attention, hoping he will find some extra time to give it to you. The Lord, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, the One who is unlike any others— all-powerful, all-knowing, sovereign, and good— He is *your* shepherd and you are never out of his sight or attention.

As amazing as the rest of the psalm is, it all hangs on the first statement - The LORD, Yahweh, the transcendent God, takes on the role of shepherd for little old you and me.

And it is because of his transcendence he can really provide all that this passage goes on to ascribe to him (we will walk through these fairly quickly):

#### **A. He offers us provision**

**Psalm 23:1**

**1** The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

I shall not “want,” David means here that he will not “lack,” not he will not “desire.” The Lord provides for our needs and he knows our needs.

## **B. He provides rest and renewal**

### **Psalm 23:2-3**

**2** He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. **3** He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

In our age of constant motion, constant connectivity, constant pressure for the next thing, project, or experience, I would guess this imagery strikes a chord with you this morning. We are so busy, and we feel like we *should* be busy or we can't help but be busy. We are so busy that we don't know where to turn for rest or when to find time for rest. And the Bible does prescribe for us Sabbath rest, it's good to take time to physically and mentally rest each week. It's good to go on vacation when possible to unplug.

But I think that this offers for us a greater vision for the rest that God offers us. Because it is tempting to think, yes, that would be good for me, but my to-do list is a mile long, my inbox is busting at the seams so I can't stop for one moment, or we don't have the vacation days left to lie down in green pastures, or escape to the Adirondacks, or read a book on a sandy beach (or whatever it is you dream of when you go to work on Monday morning). As great as those moments are, I think that this casts a greater vision for rest. One pastor described it as “rest in motion.”

In other words, yes, there is much to do, especially if you have a family, especially if you have a demanding job, and while we need to regularly make time to physically rest, our Shepherd is so good to us, and so gentle with us, and so gracious to us, that even in the midst of the craziness, our souls are able to find rest with him. Why? Because our acceptance in the flock doesn't depend on what we accomplish in our careers. Our relationship to the Shepherd does not depend on how well we parent our children. Our standing in the flock is not based on how much we can check off our to-do list each week.

And because that is true, you can find rest in the midst of the mounting pressures of each day. And it is done by drawing near to the Shepherd time and time again. He makes us lie down. He makes us rest. He assures us that he is in control and loves us and he isn't going anywhere.

## **C. The Lord, as shepherd, is also our protection**

**Psalm 23:4**

4 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.

The imagery there is the shepherd who walks with his flock with rod and staff in hand. Shepherds use their staffs to ward off predators, as well as correct and guide the sheep.

So, catch briefly here that comfort is found in protecting us from those out there who might want to harm us, but we can have comfort that the Lord will protect us from harming ourselves. He does so through his discipline. As hard as that might be when he disciplines us, it is for our good and should comfort us to know that God actually does care about the state of our souls and our walk through life.

Then, in verse 5 the imagery shifts from the Lord as a shepherd to the Lord as a generous host, and this brings with it special blessings:

**D. He brings us vindication****Psalm 23:5a**

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

The picture could either be a king providing a feast after the battle on the battlefield in the midst of the dead bodies of the enemy. Or it could also offer us the picture that though we are pursued, attacked, slandered, and surrounded but the enemy, they can do nothing to block or hinder the bountiful feast that the Lord, our host, presents to us.

The Bible says that those who desire to live a godly life in Christ, will face persecution. It is just a fact in this age. There is no getting around it. It should not surprise. It should not defeat us. Because David says, let them come. Let them say what they want. Let them do what they want. Even if we are overwhelmed by the presence of our enemies, we won't fear, because we are also in the presence of the table that the Lord has prepared for us.

And that table will satisfy all the cravings of our hearts and souls...

**Psalm 23:5b**

...you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

**E. He offers satisfaction**

The Lord is not holding anything back from you this morning. Regardless of how it might feel, God has, in Christ, prepared a feast for you and me. No need to warm up the leftovers of yesterday's feast, God has new mercies for you every single day, new grace to lavish on you every moment of each day.

And because all of that is true...

#### **F. He brings us confident hope**

##### **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.

The word "follow" there also means "to pursue." The Lord, your shepherd, chases you as it were with his goodness and mercy, not his judgment and wrath.

One pastor said this is the Old Testament way of saying Romans 8:1 - "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." In other words, the shepherd comes to you today, and everyday, even for all eternity, with mercy and goodness to welcome you into his home - that is his temple, where he dwells, you and I have been granted access, not as a visitor, but as a resident ourselves with the Lord.

Again, David says to us in these "celestial notes," the transcendent God is my shepherd. And as his sheep, he brings us provision, rest, guidance, protection, vindication, satisfaction and hope.

NOW, though we love this passage, the challenge we face time and time again, is believing it. And the way we know that to be true is that many times we don't seem to experience the Lord in these ways. And what that means is that we are looking elsewhere for other shepherds.

We might look to some social media influencer, a best selling author, political pundits, a popular podcast host, or someone else who, in our minds, can offer us the guidance, wisdom, peace, and protection we desperately crave.

OR, more often than not, we try to be our own shepherds. So, we, with our misguided hearts, end up rewriting this beautiful psalm to something far less comforting.

David Powlison, who was a Christian author and counselor, wrote what he called the "Antipsalm 23." In other words, he wrote what he thought the opposite of David's words in Psalm 23 might look like in our lives. He wrote...

**Antipsalm 23** (David Powlison,

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/two-ways-of-doing-life-psalm-23-versus-antipsalm-23/>)

I'm on my own.  
No one looks out for me or protects me.  
I experience a continual sense of need. Nothing's quite right.  
I'm always restless. I'm easily frustrated and often disappointed.  
It's a jungle—I feel overwhelmed. It's a desert—I'm thirsty.  
My soul feels broken, twisted, and stuck. I can't fix myself.  
I stumble down some dark paths.  
Still, I insist: I want to do what I want, when I want, how I want.  
But life's confusing. Why don't things ever really work out?  
I'm haunted by emptiness and futility—shadows of death.  
I fear the big hurt and final loss.  
Death is waiting for me at the end of every road,  
but I'd rather not think about that.  
I spend my life protecting myself. Bad things can happen.  
I find no lasting comfort.  
I'm alone . . . facing everything that could hurt me.  
Are my friends really friends?  
Other people use me for their own ends.  
I can't *really* trust anyone. No one has my back.  
No one is *really* for me—except me.  
And I'm so much all about ME, sometimes it's sickening.  
I belong to no one except myself.  
My cup is never quite full enough. I'm left empty.  
Disappointment follows me all the days of my life.  
Will I just be obliterated into nothingness?  
Will I be alone forever, homeless, free-falling into void?  
Sartre said, "Hell is other people."  
I have to add, "Hell is also myself."  
It's a living death,  
and then I die.

Maybe you can relate to some of those lines. Instead of turning to the Lord we shepherd ourselves, whether that is with our own abilities, efforts, possessions, or careers.

So, why do we do that? Well, at the core is unbelief. At times, we don't believe that the Lord cares, or we don't believe that he is able to walk us through difficult seasons, or



we don't believe that what we are walking through can be reconciled in any way with the words of this psalm. We might say well that isn't true of my life right now, so the Lord must not be a good shepherd; I should look elsewhere.

If that is you this morning, and it is all of us at one time or another, we need a fresh reminder that ***not only is the Lord our shepherd, but also, the gospel is our proof.***

## II. The Gospel is Our Proof

While we are most familiar with this text as a stand alone passage that brings encouragement through life's trials and comfort as we face death, what I want to make sure we don't miss is that Psalm 23 tells an even bigger story.

We should never read this psalm and hear the beautiful language it gives without also hearing echos of the exodus.

The exodus, that event in Israel's history when God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the promised land, is the background for David to write this psalm. Not only were these things true for David, this was true for Israel.

Notice the similar language in the Old Testament that described God's activity in shepherding Israel through the wilderness"

### **Deuteronomy 2:7**

For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you. **You have lacked nothing.**"

### **Numbers 10:33**

So they set out from the mount of the Lord three days' journey. And the ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them.

In Psalm 23, our translation says that we are led by "still waters." Literally, it can be translated as "waters of resting place."

### **Ex. 15:13**

"You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

So, in Israel's history, God shepherded his people to the promised land *and* he called others to act as under-shepherds to lead the people, but those leaders were unfaithful. Instead of leading the people to faithful worship of God, they led them to idolatry.

And in Ezekiel 34, God calls them out and makes a promise, saying, I will shepherd the flock of God myself.

And as we look forward in redemptive history and forward in the Bible, we see the Lord make good on his promise, he takes on flesh, and becomes our good shepherd.

**John 10:7-16**

**7** So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. **8** All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. **9** I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. **10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. **11** I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. **12** He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. **13** He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. **14** I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, **15** just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. **16** And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus is the good shepherd who leads his people in a new exodus to the better promised land.

Jesus really is the good shepherd of Psalm 23:  
Jesus is the good shepherd who provides life and life in abundance.

Jesus is the good shepherd who is himself, living waters.

Jesus is the good shepherd who walked the paths of righteousness on our behalf and calls us to follow him.

Jesus is the good shepherd who walked through the valley of the shadow of death *for* us and now walks through the valley of the shadow of death *with* us.

Jesus is the good shepherd who has protected us from death by defeating death through *his* own death and resurrection.

Jesus is the good shepherd who will one day prepare a feast for his bride when he comes again to put an end to our enemies and welcome us into his presence for all eternity.

Again, Jesus is the good shepherd that Psalm 23 points to, so if we ever have a hard time believing that the Lord is our shepherd, remember that the gospel is our proof.

## **CHALLENGE**

As we wrap up Psalm 23, we should reflect and ask ourselves - What lesser shepherds am I trusting in? As part of the flock of God, draw near to your good shepherd because he is near you.

Are you overwhelmed today and desperately need comfort. Well, the reason Psalm 23 has been so beloved for generations is because we can summarize it without the need for super spiritual, high-brow theological language. Instead, we might simply summarize Psalm 23 by saying, "The Lord is our shepherd; we're going to be ok." There will still be pain, there will still be death, until the Lord comes, but in the meantime, we will be ok.

For those without a faith in Jesus today. Jesus invites you into the flock, but before you can call Jesus your shepherd you first need to see yourself as a sheep by nature - foolish and dependent. That's true for all of us. But you can have a part in the flock and call Jesus your own; turn to him this morning in faith.

## **CONFESSION**

## **PRAYER**

## **ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

The book of Revelation gives us another beautiful image of Jesus as the shepherd of his people. Speaking of those who have out their faith in Jesus...

### **Revelation 7:15-17**

**15** "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. **16** They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. **17** 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.”

So, let's stand and worship the Lord this morning...

### **VERSES**

Psalm 23:1-6

Psalm 23:1a

Exodus 3:13-14

Isaiah 42:8

Psalm 23:1

Psalm 23:2-3

Psalm 23:4

Psalm 23:5a

Psalm 23:5b

Psalm 23:6

Deuteronomy 2:7

Numbers 10:33

Exodus 15:13

John 10:7-16

Revelation 7:15-17

### **SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why do you think Psalm 23 has been such a beloved psalm?
2. Why is both God's transcendence and immanence important for us?
3. In what ways have you experienced the "Anti-psalm 23"?
4. What lesser shepherds are you tempted to follow?
5. How does the gospel illuminate this psalm?