

Who Is Your Pastor?

Psalm 23

Main point: If Jehovah is your Pastor you can trust Him for your daily *provisions, protection, and peace* because He is with you.

The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.
³ He restores my soul;
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.
⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I 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 have anointed my head with oil;
My cup overflows.
⁶ Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

PSALM 23

Introduction:

Recently, a research survey was conducted with roughly 1,500 people followed by an interview with 200 people, in two rounds of interviews in 12 locations around the United States. One question the survey posed was, "Is there a text that is important for you in difficult times?" Not all the people answered the question, but of those who did, 15 percent of respondents named Psalm 23 as their "go-to" passage in troubled times.

Psalm 23 is an essential text for two reasons. First, it enables you to walk by faith more effectively. If you are a golfer, a putter is an essential club to have in your bag. If you are a cook, a chef's knife is an essential tool to have in your kitchen. You can golf without a putter, and you can cook without a chef's knife, but who would want to? You can live the Christian life without knowing the truth of this psalm, but who would want to? This psalm will place an essential truth in your life for living effectively for Christ.

Second, Psalm 23 equips you to pray by faith more skillfully. When the bridges in your life have been washed out by a flood of troubled waters, *how do you pray?* Imagine yourself in crisis mode. You're standing in need in the darkest valley. You are surrounded by the most vicious and deceptive opponents. How will you find the wherewithal to make it through? This psalm was designed to put words in your mouth and confidence in your heart to speak to God, especially when you are in a crisis. In order to do this, you must understand both the *structure* and *theology* of this psalm.

Psalm 23 is called a psalm of *trust*. Psalms of trust presume *situations of crisis*. To help us imagine ourselves as the one speaking or praying this psalm, David sets before us three rich metaphors of crisis that can be applied to many situations. Take a close look at this famous and familiar psalm, and you will see,

- In verses 1-3, the image of **a Shepherd and his sheep**—what kind of *relationship* do they have?
- In verse 4, the image of **a traveler and his Companion**—what kind of *confidence* does it bring?
- In verses 5-6, the image of **a Host and his guest**—what kind of *attitude* should this generate?

Each of these pictures is followed by a ringing affirmation, sort of like a testimony which the psalmist gives of his theology of trust.

- In verse 1, he says, "**I shall not want.**" Why? Because Jehovah is my Shepherd. It's the promise of *provision*.
- In verse 4, he says, "**I fear no evil.**" Why? Because Jehovah's presence is with me. It's the assurance of *protection*.
- In verse 6, he says, "**I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**" Why? Because Jehovah's two secret agents of *goodness* and *lovingkindness* keep pursuing me all the days of my life. It's the confidence of *peace*.

From this you should be able to see that the *three parts* are linked by the *three affirmation* which David makes. Together, they combine to teach us something about the relationship of the believer with the Lord.

Couched in these images is a pastoral *tone and scene*, "...he makes me lie down in green pastures...he leads me beside quiet waters...he restores my soul and guides me in paths of righteousness." But David is not just painting poetic pictures or waxing eloquently as he writes these hymns. David himself has been a shepherd, and now he is a king. He was not only a shepherd physically, but he was also Israel's shepherd spiritually. Yet there is a very personal reality which David is seeking to convey in these images, and it is this:

- **Jehovah is my Pastor.** John calls him the "*Good Shepherd*" because He died to save His sheep (*John 10:14*). The writer to the Hebrews calls him the "*Great Shepherd*" because He is rose from the dead (*Heb.13:20*). Peter calls him the "*Chief Shepherd*" because He is coming again (*1 Pet.5:4*). And this good, great, and chief Shepherd is unchanging in His love and goodness, unlimited in His wisdom and power, and unmatched in His authority above all others.

"Who is your pastor?" If you are a member of this church, then I, alongside with the other elders, share the privilege of being your *under-shepherds*. But if Jehovah is not your Pastor, *you are still outside the borders of His flock, and you stand in real spiritual danger! Should you hear His voice in this message, you must come into His fold this very hour*. But if Jehovah is your Pastor, if you have heard His voice and come out of the world to follow Jesus, then these words are true of you to claim, to believe, and to confess. They are given to deepen your trust and confidence.

The opening words, "**The LORD**" sets the theme for the psalm as a whole and occurs again in the last verse to form an *inclusio* (vv.1, 6). They serve as "bookends," which bracket the psalm and point to the main truth right in the center of verse 4—"You are with me." This is the foundation of our trust. There are only two possible responses to a promise like this: *to believe it or not to believe it. To trust it or not to trust it. To live as if the promise is real and trustworthy or to live as if the promise isn't real or trustworthy.*

Exposition:

Let me frame this psalm under these three headings.

A. Your Wants, His Riches (vv.1-3)

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

It was said of Samuel Rutherford, the 16th-century pastor and contemporary of Shakespeare, "He seemed to be always praying, always visiting the sick, always catechizing, always writing and studying. He had two quick eyes, and when he walked, it was observed that he held his face upward" as if always looking to heaven. In his book, *The Loveliness of Christ*, he wrote, "*Wants are my best riches, for I have these supplied by Christ.*"

We are not accustomed to thinking of our "**wants**" as *riches*. For we have been rightly taught that there is a difference between "*our needs*" and "*our wants*" or "*our needs*" and "*our greeds*." However, Rutherford's quote got me to thinking about "wants" from another angle.

When David penned these words, he was not thinking of *wants* as some base or selfish desires to consume on himself in some sort of *indulgent* and *sinful way*. The ancient king of Israel, who had been a shepherd himself on the plains of Palestine, knew that sheep only had a few basic *wants*. They want to be *fed, led, and protected*. And when he compared "*their wants*" to "*his wants*" as a believer, it became for him NOT a cause for *discontentment*, but a cause for *contentment*. A reason for *trusting* and *rejoicing*. The fundamental point expressed by the first metaphor is that of *complete provision*.

Notice, how *complete the provision* is for those who know Jehovah as their Pastor. It embraces almost every sphere of their lives. Jehovah is a pastor who provides four necessities we all have.

1. He provides physical rest.

Verse 2a—"He makes me lie down in green pastures;" Now, this speaks about our need for *physical rest*, and here we see that Jehovah has a concern about our physical well-being. Consult any reliable resource on shepherding and sheep, and you will discover that sheep never graze when they are lying down. The shepherd doesn't make them lie down in green pastures so that they can graze there, but rather, so they can *rest* there. It is His concern for their *physical rest* and well-being that causes him to seek out an environment in which they might thrive—hence, green pastures.

Now, don't get the idea that Jehovah is the kind of Shepherd that will forcefully "make" you lie down through *sickness* and trouble because you won't do it on your own. I have heard that kind of teaching before and needed to be corrected of it in my own life. No, the picture here is that because Jehovah is a cosmic Shepherd who cares for us, He is *active* in providing for His sheep the places of growth, because He would have them to lie down and rest.

- In Psalm 127, Solomon writes that *sleep or rest is a divine gift*. "*It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.*"

What we *build* and keep *watch* over, what we *rise early for* and *stay up late taking care of* only matters if God is a part of it. And, what we need to know is that Jehovah *enjoys giving rest to those He loves*.

2. He provides emotional peace.

Verse 2b—"He leads me beside quiet waters." Here David conveys to us that if Jehovah is our Pastor, He is also concerned about *our emotional well-being*. Literally, "**quiet waters**" here means *placid, peaceful waters of many kinds of rest*. David is not just thinking of the refreshment that comes

from sheep lapping the cool fresh water of a stream, but he is ultimately thinking of what believers need *physically* and *emotionally* as they face all the draining challenges of life.

The idea that David has in mind is more than *bodily repose*. The word for rest (*menuhot*) connotes protection from enemies, the environment in which life might thrive, and the lifting of any threat of divine punishment. The word is found in Genesis 8:9, when Noah sent out a dove to see if *"the waters was abated from the face of the land, but the dove found no resting place for the sole of her foot."* It is found in Joshua 21:44, when Israel first came into possession of the land and *"God gave them rest on every side."* **Dear friends, where can you find this kind of rest today?** Jesus Himself promised this kind of double rest for those who come to Him. *A rest that is given and a rest that is found (Matt.11:28-30).*

What David wants us to see is that *as our Pastor, Jehovah* is not just concerned about *one* or *two* areas of our lives, and therefore we must deal with the others. No, no, but rather, He is a complete Shepherd who is *concerned* and *committed* to the needs of every conceivable area we have! For this *emotional rest*, we need Jehovah as our Pastor to *"lead us...beside these placid waters,"* that is, we need His *divine guidance*.

As our Pastor, Jehovah is concerned about our *physical well-being*, our *emotional well-being*, and our *spiritual well-being*.

3. He provides spiritual restoration.

Verse 3a—**"He restores my soul;"** David knew a great deal about this, but some listening today have not found this to be true in your experience. Since you have stumbled and fallen, you seem to be just limping along and not running at full strength again. What is the reason?

Perhaps you are listening to people who are feeding you false teaching, like Israel. And God said in **Jeremiah 50:6**,

- My people have become lost sheep;
Their shepherds have led them astray.
They have made them turn aside *on* the mountains;
They have gone along from mountain to hill
And have forgotten their resting place.

You've sought rest without repentance, and the way back starts with *returning to the Lord*.

- **Isaiah 30:15**—For thus the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, has said,
"In repentance and rest you will be saved,
In quietness and trust is your strength."
But you were not willing,

The word **"restore"** is the same word that David used in Psalm 19:7 when he said, *"The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul."* David knew what it meant to *backslide* and *drift away* from God and the riches of sweet communion with Him. He knew what it meant to be *a man after God's heart*, and then suffer *setbacks* and fall into the *pits of despair* because of sin. And so, he knew what it meant to *need spiritual restoration*.

And what he knew for himself, he wants us to know—and that is, you can go to the One who is a Pastor of your soul: Jehovah! Jehovah can revive you, restore you, and transforms and refresh the entire inner life of your being!

But know this: just as *backsliding is gradual*, restoration is *gradual*. Listen, if you have fallen, most likely, the slide was happening imperceptibly for some time. There has been a *hardening*, a *distancing*, a *turning away* that moved you like a ship drifting unnoticeably on a slow current. And now you have crashed and suffered shipwreck in your faith, and the question remains: how do you get restored? Listen to David again, "*The law of the LORD is perfect*" (Ps.19:7). the Word of God is enough. It is whole, complete, without blemish, sufficient, and it is so complete that He can revive, convert, and transform you.

How would you know if you're in the process of restoration?

If Jehovah is your Pastor, He not only provides *physical rest*, *emotional peace*, and *spiritual restoration*, but He also provides...

4. He provides moral guidance.

Verse 3b—"**He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.**" It is no secret that sheep, by nature, need direction.

As David thought about himself as a sheep, and his former occupation as a shepherd, he knew that sheep lack a sense of *clear direction*. And so do we. They don't know whether they are going east, west, north, or south. And this is why Isaiah said, "*We like sheep have gone astray, each one of us has turned to his own way*" (Is.53:6). It is our nature to do this, and as our Pastor, Jehovah comes in all sorts of ways to put pressure upon our lives here and there, in order to direct us and guide us in "**paths of righteousness.**" What are these paths? Proverbs 2:9 calls it "*the good course.*" Proverbs 4:11 calls it an "*upright path.*" Isaiah 26:7 calls it, "*the way of the righteous.*" It simply means that the pathways in which the Lord leads have to do with obedience to His will and law. Divine guidance is always mediated via the instructing guidance of Scripture!

What is God's motive in leading us in His will? As our Pastor, Jehovah does it "**for His name's sake.**" In other words, God acts in leading us in righteousness because it is consistent with His righteous character and His promise.

The name of Jehovah, which *begins* and *ends* the psalm is a name of which He is jealous (Ex.34:14; Deut.4:24; Josh.24:19; Nah.1:2). Because He longs to see His people reflect His *holiness*, He "*guides us in the paths of righteousness.*" Ezekiel 36: 27 says He gives us "*His Spirit*" in the new birth and "*causes us to walk in His statutes.*"

These paths of righteousness are not only things that have to do with *our physical well-being*, *our emotional peace*, and *spiritual restoration*, but they may also include *difficulty*, *suffering*, and *trials*.

Now verse 4 is the "bridge" into the next picture in the psalm about **the traveler and his Companion**. Now flip to picture in your mind and think with me now about...

B. Your Fears, His Presence (v.4)

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

The emphasis is no longer the quiet, pastoral scene where the landscape is dotted with sheep and shepherds, but now, from the language of David's poetry, a different picture emerges. David is walking as a pilgrim or traveler—"Even though I walk..."—and now he encounters "**the valley of the shadow of death.**" What does that mean?

- Jeremiah uses the same phrase to describe *the deep shadow of the hard wilderness*. (Jer.2:6)
- Job uses the phrase to describe *the threat of death*. (Job 10:21-22)

When you put them together, they speak of *difficult terrain, rough places, and unpleasant or adversarial encounters* in our journey. David is signaling to us that as believers, we are like pilgrims in this world, and we are going to face *dark, difficult valleys*.

Notice carefully not only *the difference of scene*, but also *the difference of mood*. In the first three verses, Jehovah is addressed in the third person as David speaks *about* his Pastor, "**He makes me...He leads me...He restores me...He guides me...**" But now in the second picture, David addresses Jehovah in the second person, "*I will fear no evil, for **You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me...You have anointed my head...***"

This shift in mood marks the *confidence* that every believer can know *if Jehovah is your Pastor*. If the first picture of a shepherd and his sheep meant to convey Jehovah's complete provision for us, then the second picture of a traveler and his Companion is meant to teach us about Jehovah's complete protection.

The Palestinian shepherd normally carried two implements—a club (rod) to fend off wild beasts and a crook (or staff) to guide and control the sheep. But David is able to say with confidence that "**I will fear no evil.**" Why? Not because Jehovah is out in front of Him like a shepherd leading His sheep, guiding Him with perfect wisdom, but because He is right beside him as a Companion—"You are with me."

This is the same promise that He gave to **Jacob**.

- **Genesis 28:15**—"Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

It was the same promise to young **Jeremiah**.

- **Jeremiah 1:8**—"Do not be afraid of them, For I am with you to deliver you," declares the LORD.

It was the same promise that **Isaiah gave to the exiles**.

- **Isaiah 41:10**—"Do not fear, for I am with you;
Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you, surely I will help you,
Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand." (Cf. 43:5)

It was the heart of the message announce by **Haggai** to those who had returned from exile.

- **Haggai 2:4**—"But now take courage, Zerubbabel," declares the LORD, "take courage also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all you people of the land take courage," declares the LORD, "and work; for I am with you," declares the LORD of hosts.

It is the heart of the message that fueled the early church.

- **Matthew 28:20**—"teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

It was Jehovah's presence alongside David, and with us that brings comfort! When facing *the darkest valley, the hardest trouble, the most life-threatening distress, or the greatest fear-generating situation*—things that take you into *the trenches of concern and crisis* and force you out of your *comfort zone*—David would have us to know that Jehovah's *protection* is as complete as His *provision*.

Do you face an unknown future? Do you anticipate days of deep shadows and distress? If so, here is what David would have you to know if Jehovah is your Pastor.

Sounds a lot like Romans 8:31, doesn't it? "*What can we say to these things? If God be for us, who is against us?*" Not who "can" be against us, but who "is" against us?

- When Jehovah is your Pastor, it is not a club or a stick that becomes your confidence.
- When Jehovah is your Pastor, it is not a miracle that you depend on.
- When Jehovah is your Pastor, it is *His presence with you and in you that makes all the difference in the world*.

It made the difference in Abraham's life. After a great battle with the group of eastern kings, Abram found himself alone and without an heir. But the word of the Lord came to him in a vision saying,

- **Genesis 15:1**—"Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."

When Jehovah is your Pastor, God doesn't necessarily *provide* a shield for you; He *is* a shield to you. He is not only a *shield*, but He is also a *strong tower*.

- **Proverbs 18:10**—The name of the LORD is a strong tower; The righteous runs into it and is safe.
- **Psalms 27:1**—The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the defense of my life; Whom shall I dread?

This is why the chief business or the main priority of your life and mine is *to know God*. Now, one final shift takes place. From *the Shepherd and his sheep to the traveler and His Companion*, David now thinks of God as **the Host** and the believer as **His guest**.

C. Your Heart, His Home (vv.5-6)

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

⁶ Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The imagery of a “**table prepared**” for David “**in the presence of his enemies**” is lifted from Psalm 78 *as the stubborn and stiff-necked nation of Israel* continued to sin against God, although He delivered them from bondage and provided abundant water in the desert. To vent their unbelief, they questioned God’s character by saying,

- **Psalm 78:19-20**—Then they spoke against God;
They said, “Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?”
²⁰ “Behold, He struck the rock so that waters gushed out,
And streams were overflowing;
Can He give bread also?
Will He provide meat for His people?”
- Is this a table of hospitality, such as the one that the unaware Abraham was spreading while entertaining angels? (*Gen.18:1-8*)
- Is this a table of thanksgiving, such as the one celebrated after the harvest or some experience of God’s blessing? (*Deut.12:17-19*)
- Is this a table of imagining the millennial feast? We do not know. (*Is.55*)

But what is undeniable is that *at that table*, the Host—who is *God Himself*—honors him by “**anointing his head with oil**” and blessing him abundantly so that “**my cup overflows.**”

The symbolism of the head being “*anointed with oil*” to the degree that one’s “*cup overflows*” simply points us to the overwhelming goodness of God that overflows with thanksgiving! Jehovah is not only his *Pastor* and his *Companion*, but He is David’s *Host*—lavishing blessing upon blessing, upon blessing, even in the midst of trouble.

Now don’t miss the subtle insight. Jehovah provides this *honor* and *blessing* not only *in difficult situations*, but *in front of difficult people*. “**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.**”

People can be the instruments of some of the deepest pain in our hearts, and the misery goes deeper when it is people who claim to be Christians. But David teaches us that even in these instances, God welcomes us to His banquet table and serves us up some divine joy! He spreads it before us like a King’s buffet and serves it to us right in their presence so they can see!

How is this true? Because He goes before us as our *Shepherd*. He walks alongside us as our *Companion*, and finally, He comes behind us with *His goodness* and *faithfulness*.

⁶ Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The word “**follow**” is too tame in the English, the Hebrew really conveys *the idea of pursuing*. They are pictured as forces that will not rest until they have tracked you down and provided a safe harbor.

Jehovah, your Pastor, has put on the trail of every follower of His, *two special agents*: “**goodness**” flanking you on the left, and “**lovingkindness**” flanking you on the right, and no matter which way you turn, these two attributes of God will move you, for the rest of your days, closer and closer and closer to eternity until you reach your home with Him!

- We shall not want. (*vv.1-3*)
- We shall not fear. (*vv.4-5*)
- We shall not fail. (*v.6*)

Why? Because Jehovah is our Pastor whose *provision, protection, and peace are complete*. The *provision* is God. The *protection* is God. The *path of righteousness* is God. The *table* is God. The *goodness* and *lovingkindness* are God. The *destination* is God.

Now, remember, this is a *psalm of trust*. You can only have one of two responses to it: *trust* or *not trust*. *Believe* or *not believe*. *Live as if the promise is real and trustworthy* or *live as if the promise is not trustworthy*.

Conclusion: **So what? Now what?**

- Are you being choked with worry about your needs? Jehovah says, “*I am your Shepherd.*”
- Are you walking through a difficult and dark patch right now? Jehovah says, “*I am with you.*”
- Are you surrounded by enemies? Jehovah says, “*I will give you what you need at My table in the presence of your enemies...Trust Me.*”

The God who came to us in Immanuel is with us still. In spite of our lack of trust and our failure to follow. Jesus promises, “*I am with you, to the end of the age*” (*Matt.28:20*).

If you have been listening and **Jehovah is not your Pastor**, listen to the Good Shepherd once again calling you.

- **John 10:7-11, 14-16, 27-30**—“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. ⁹I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰The 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.

I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, ¹⁵even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd.

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰I and the Father are one.”

The Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Jesus of the New Testament. The name Jesus actually means, "*Jehovah saves.*"

There is no other Savior! No other Shepherd like Christ! If our want is to be *fed, led, and protected*—then our want is supplied by Christ's riches, our fear is assuaged by His indwelling presence, and our heart will be His home. What a Pastor Jehovah is!

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