

## Psalms for Today: Psalm 23

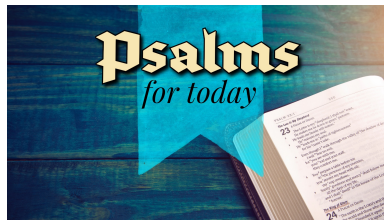
### Psalm 23



We've heard it said that God's Word is a living Word, but what does that mean?

It could mean a number of things, but I think it means that whatever we walk through in life, there is something in there that speaks to us. Even the same verse at different points in our lives can speak to us in very different ways. It lives and breaths as we live and breath.

One of the books that exemplifies this idea is the book of Psalms.



In fact, it was meant to exemplify this idea. The Book of Psalms is a collection of writings from many authors. We often call them songs, but they are more than that. They are songs, yes, but they are also meditations and prayers and acts of worship.

This book was designed for worship. It was designed to be read and read again, sung and sung again, prayed and prayed again. It was designed for times of rejoicing and praise. It was designed for times of sorrow, even anger.

In short, the Psalms were designed for everyday life. Or, maybe a better way to put it...they were designed for *any* day life.

That includes today. Right now.

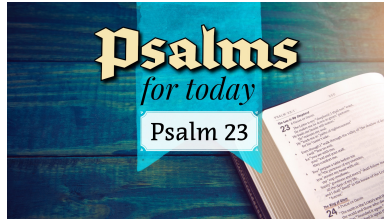
These writings are as alive today as they were when they were written thousands of years ago. So we're going to look at some of these Psalms over the next five weeks. And we're going to see how even just five of them have something very valuable to tell us still today.

The first one we're going to focus on is definitely one of the more famous Psalms, maybe even the most famous one.

It made an appearance in the movie *Titanic*. Artists from Pink Floyd to the Grateful Dead to Coolio have borrowed lines from it.

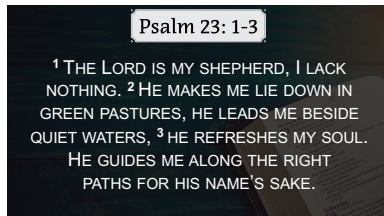
You've probably heard it read at funerals. You may even think it's supposed to be read at funerals. Hint – it's more than that, and we'll find that out soon.

In one way or another, I'm sure you are familiar with the words of Psalm 23.



But often with familiarity and repetition, we start to lose the meaning, the heart, of what we read and hear. We don't want that, because this Psalm has so much to tell us.

So what we're going to do is take it slowly. We're going to read a handful of lines, and then pause and digest what it's telling us. I think by the end of this, we're going to see why this Psalm should be a daily reminder for us.



So let's start reading the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, beginning with the first three verses:

*<sup>1</sup> The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
<sup>3</sup> he refreshes my soul.  
He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake.*

In 2011, The Muppets released a new movie, and the opening song to that movie was called, "Life's a Happy Song." One of the refrains in that song was "I've got everything that I need!"

I can't help but hear that in my head as I read these opening few verses. I lack nothing. I've got everything that I need!

But the Psalmist sets up an important image: "The Lord is my shepherd."

That first statement is extremely important as we move through this Psalm. We need the frame of mind that we are sheep and the Lord is our shepherd. It might even help to think of this Psalm as narrated by a sheep so that you can get all of the imagery it's meant to evoke.



As humans, green pastures and still waters are relaxing and beautiful. We would enjoy passing time in a place like that.

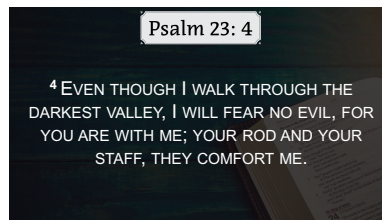
But if we continue that idea that we are sheep, this setting becomes more than pretty.

It's life-giving.

Green pastures represent fertile ground that gives us food to live. It's safe ground. We don't have to worry about rough terrain. It's easier to guard against predators.

Still waters here is perhaps better understood as a gently flowing stream. The waters aren't so rough that they are dangerous, and they're not stagnant that they are dirty. In other words, perfect for a shepherd to lead his flock to water them.

The Lord guides his flock, us as his sheep, along all the right paths to the place where we have all that we need.



Let's take another step in Psalm 23 as we read the fourth verse:

*4 Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.*

This is the part we know and we hear in all those places that borrow from this Psalm. We're used to seeing it translated with "the valley of the shadow of death" rather than "the darkest valley," but let me explain something there.



The Hebrew word used for “shadow of death” means a death-like shadow, a deep, dark shadow. It’s not talking about our time of death. It’s talking about our time of struggle, our time of difficulty.

What we need to picture here is a dark ravine, with steep and ominous cliffs on either side. It’s filled with uninviting trees and dense brush. It has plenty of hiding places for predators.

And so for sheep, not only is this treacherous terrain, it also represents mortal danger.

It’s not an inviting place.

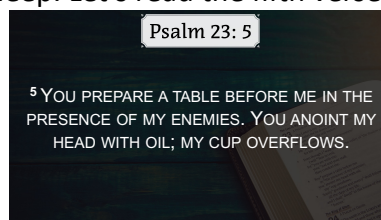


And that’s where the rod and the staff come in. The rod was a club worn at the belt. The staff was a walking stick that was also used to guide sheep and could double as a weapon to beat back predators.

Sheep could fear no evil walking through the most uninviting places, knowing their shepherd was there to guide and protect them.

As sheep of the Good Shepherd, what do we really have to fear walking through our darkest valleys, if we truly know that our Shepherd guides and protects us as well?

As we move into the second half of this Psalm, we seemingly start to depart from the shepherd imagery. But I want to show you how we miss some important meaning if we don’t continue to think of that shepherd and his sheep. Let’s read the fifth verse:



*<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.*

I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention David at some point today, because David is the author of this Psalm.



David's head was anointed with oil as God chose him to become Israel's king. David is looking back on his life and recounting all the blessings he received from God.

So there's a human aspect to these words that we can't ignore. God prepares a table for us like he prepared a table for David. God has chosen us like He chose David. God blesses us like He blessed David.

But David wasn't a king all his life. He started as a shepherd. So he knows things about sheep and about shepherding that we just don't.



There is something called tableland. While tableland can occur naturally, more often the shepherd had to clear out land of poisonous plants and dangerous animals. This established the land, the table, for grazing and keeping.

The shepherd, in caring for his sheep, had to prepare tableland in full view of any possible enemies. Outside the safety of the tableland, there is danger. Inside the area the shepherd prepares, there is safety.



Also while caring for his sheep, oil was valuable to a shepherd. Pouring oil on the sheep's head would keep pests and bugs away from the sheep.

These aren't just annoying little gnats, either. They are bugs that can travel up the sheep's nose, lay eggs, and cause infection, irritation, and even brain disease.

Us coming to our Shepherd and allowing Him to cover us keeps all those annoying and troubling things in life from festering inside of us.

Oil protected the sheep when they fought with other sheep. We know that sheep like to butt heads in order to assert dominance in the herd. Oil allowed the strikes to land more softly and to glance off without doing much harm.

Good thing we aren't sheep! Good thing we never butt heads!

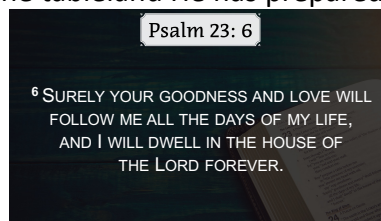
But if we ever did, allowing our Shepherd to cover us allows us to disagree with grace, without hurting one another in the process.

Oil also acted as a healing agent. Sheep are, of course, outdoor animals. There are always things in the outdoors that jab, and barb, and cut, and bite. Pouring oil over a wound helped to clean it and helped with the healing process.

Us coming to our Shepherd and allowing Him to cover us renews and restores us from the times when our world has also jabbed and cut and wounded us.

Our cup running over absolutely tells us of the never-ending and abundant love and blessings our God pours on us. But it also tells us of the care and grace and restoration our Shepherd provides.

Our shepherd has so much oil to offer us that the cup cannot contain it all. We just need to come to our Shepherd, graze in the tableland He has prepared, and allow Him to cover us.



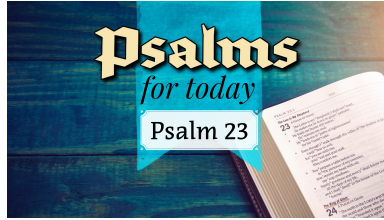
And finally, we end with the sixth verse:

*6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord  
forever.*

I'm not going to give you anything fancy here. I'm just going to give you this verse straight up.

As we look back and reflect on all that it means for us to have a Good Shepherd, as we look back on all the ways Psalm 23 tells us He cares for us and guides us and protects us, how can we think anything else but the fact that the goodness and love of our Shepherd will follow us for as long as we graze on this earth?

And after our grazing is finished, we will go back to live in the house of our Shepherd forevermore.



Psalm 23 is not just for funerals.

Psalm 23 is not a psalm we should hear in a movie and think it was nice they included it.

Psalm 23 is meant to be a constant reminder of our need to be guided and protected and cared for. It's a reminder of the dangerous and fearful things we walk through. It's a reminder of everything around us that can do us harm.

And it's meant to be a constant reminder that we have a Good Shepherd that has prepared a place for us to keep us in His care. He has the abundant power to heal and restore and protect us. He will guide us down every right path in the face of all the wrong paths around us.

Psalm 23 is praise for our Shepherd.

This is indeed a psalm that we don't just need today.

It's a psalm that we need every day.

And all of God's people said...