

Psalm 23
“A Song of Trust”

Introduction:

David is identified as the author of this psalm, and it is evident that he drew upon his own life experience as a shepherd to express in poetic form the close intimate relationship that He enjoyed with the God of Israel. The structure of the Psalm is built around two images of God, He is pictured first as a caring shepherd (vs.1-4), and then as a host of a lavish banquet (vs.5-6). Overall, this Psalm is a declaration of David’s confident trust in God. This Psalm contains no requests or petitions; it is simply an acknowledgment of God’s continuous gracious provisions. The tone of the Psalm suggests that this was written later in David’s life, because it seems to reflect David’s long experience of trusting God that lay behind the words of this poem. The Psalm invites the reader to meditate on all that Yahweh does for the one who trusts in Him.

There have been various suggestions made regarding when in David’s life he wrote this Psalm. However, since the Psalm contains no historical references nor any included details that point to a specific time in David’s life, it is impossible to know precisely when this Psalm was written, so it is best not to speculate about this.

The universal appeal of this Psalm lies in how it provides comfort to those who are in the midst of the most difficult trials of life.

In this Psalm, David listed seven ways that God is at work in the lives of those who are His, which reveals His tender care, ceaseless vigilance, and perpetual presence:

- 1) He makes
- 2) He leads
- 3) He restores
- 4) He guides
- 5) He is with
- 6) He prepares
- 7) He anoints

The overall intent of the Psalm is to reassure those who are in a covenant relationship with Yahweh that they can trust and rest in His care, provision, and protection. This spiritual truth should inspire confidence in God and assurance of His commitment to us throughout all that life may hold for us.

I. Praising Yahweh as our Provider: (vs.1-3a)

The Psalm begins with the words, “*The LORD is my shepherd*” (vs.1a). The Hebrew word translated as “*my shepherd*” is in the form of a participle that is based on a verb that stresses the idea of feeding. The verb itself means to care for in terms of providing a place to graze. Therefore, the metaphorical usage of this title presents Yahweh as One who provides for His people. The designation of Yahweh as a shepherd most frequently is applied to the Israelites as a whole, rather than to

a particular individual, however, in this verse there is structural emphasis on the pronoun “*my*”, stressing that Yahweh was not only the shepherd of His people in a general sense, but was also the shepherd of each individual, in this case of David. In using the pronoun “*my*” David was emphasizing the personal nature of His relationship with God. He was not just part of a group that God provided for, more specifically, David recognized that he as an individual was the object of God’s love and that God was committed to specifically providing for him and protecting him. The metaphor of a shepherd was a common one in the O.T. (Ps.28:9; 77:20; 79:13; 80:1; Isa.40:11; Micah 7:14). And this imagery of God as shepherd is rooted in God’s great redemptive acts of the past, particularly His deliverance of Israel from Egypt and His leading of His people to the Promised Land. These past theological realities served to give David confidence regarding God’s providential provisions for his life. In David’s time, the imagery of a faithful shepherd represented the epitome of tender care and watchfulness. The metaphor was a natural one for David, who most likely was the shepherd-king of Israel when he wrote this Psalm. The use of a shepherd as a metaphor to represent one responsible for the welfare of others was a common one in the ancient Near East. At that time, and in that part of the world, many kings compared themselves to shepherds in their leadership capacity. The prophecy of the coming Messiah incorporated this same metaphor (Isa 40:11), and Jesus identified Himself as that anticipated “*Good Shepherd*” (John 10:14) sent by God to provide for the spiritual welfare of His people. Therefore, to refer to God as a “*shepherd*” would naturally convey that David understood Yahweh to be his king.

In the second clause of verse one we read, “*I shall not want*” (vs.1b). This clause, and the next two verses should be interpreted as a poetic commentary on the opening statement (*the LORD is my shepherd*). Therefore, in the statement “*I shall not want*” David was expressing that this reality was a consequence of Yahweh being his shepherd. The Hebrew word translated as “*want*” refers to a lack of something, and with this word David affirmed that there was no lack or deficiency in Yahweh’s provision. David was expressing that God was continually and fully supplying everything that he needed.

Next, we read that David continued to elaborate on the experience of having God as his shepherd, “*He makes me to lie down in green pastures*” (vs.2a). This line in the Psalm builds on the previous verse. It expresses that Yahweh leads His people to the best provisions to feed them. The Hebrew wording translated here as “*green pastures*” was used in Deuteronomy 32:2 to refer to the fresh grass that receives the morning dew, therefore the terminology refers to fresh moist grass. In that part of the world, fresh green grass was a seasonal phenomenon. The fields, and even portions of the desert would produce green grass in the winter and spring. However, in the summer and fall, a shepherd would have to lead the sheep greater distances in order to find proper fodder, and what could be found was not as lush as what was available in the winter and spring. The implied contrast that David was conveying here was that God’s care for His people was not seasonal or dependent on favorable conditions but was constant and abundant regardless of the circumstances. This picture of the sheep eating grass is emblematic of how God

feeds His people. The focus here is not on the provision of physical food. This is clear from the references to the spiritual benefits that David lists in this Psalm, and from the focus on God's Word as the ultimate source of nourishment for God's people that is found in many of his other Psalms. Therefore, the focus here is on the spiritual nourishment that God provides for His people. The reference to the "*green pastures*" was to communicate that God would provide for His people in an abundant and luxurious way, not just enough to survive, but to thrive.

Then we read, in the latter part of verse two, "*He leads me beside the still waters*" (vs.2b). The Hebrew word translated as "*still*" is better rendered as "*restful*" (literally "*restfulness*"), meaning places of complete rest and refreshment. The word is used as an attributive genitive after "*waters*", describing the kind of waters in view. In Hebrew this word for "*rest*" means more than mere bodily repose, it denotes protection from one's enemies, an environment in which life might thrive, and the absence of any threat or concern. The description of this provision is not meant to be understood as saying that God leads His sheep to a place where they can get a drink from a calm pool of water, it refers to being guided to a place where the sheep can get plenty to drink and where they can also be cleansed and refreshed, where waters were available to wash the wounds and cleanse stains in the sheep's wool. There is no focus here on water that isn't moving, rather the restfulness indicates what the sheep do alongside the water, not the state of the water itself. The idea is that as God leads His people, He provides not only nourishment, but refreshment and rest. God's provisions make it possible for them to live in a way that is free from worry, pressure and tension.

As David continued, he wrote, "*He restores my soul*" (vs.3a). The Hebrew word translated as "*restores*" refers to returning something to its original condition. This word is used frequently to refer to repentance and healing, and it is used in this sense here. The Hebrew word translated as "*soul*" does not refer to the non-material part of a person, but to the self, and here its meaning is equivalent to the pronoun "*me*". The idea in the imagery is that as a human shepherd leads his sheep to places with abundant water where there is opportunity for rest, refreshment and even healing, so Yahweh makes provision for His people so that their lives can be spiritually restored and refreshed. The reality is that in life we are often worn down by circumstances, and we are continually dealing with our inclination to sin. Therefore, in situations where we are feeling drained or that we have failed, this Psalm encourages us with the reminder that God will always make provision for us to receive forgiveness, strengthening, and healing in our souls so we can be re-invigorated for our continued journey down the path of life.

II. Praising Yahweh as our Guide: (vs.3b-4)

Next, David wrote, "*He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake*" (vs.3b). The expression "*paths of righteousness*" does not refer to God leading His people to a place where they obtain righteousness. David was not writing about the destination, he was speaking about the journey, the nature of the path that God chooses for those who follow Him. The Hebrew word translated here as

“*righteousness*” means that which is “*right*”, and it speaks about the path being “*right*” in two fundamental ways. First, God leads His sheep along the best path to get them to their destination. This is opposite the idea of going along crooked paths that lead one into harmful situations. But at the same time, the wording conveys that God leads His people in the way that is morally righteous (meaning both that He does not lead them into sin, and He doesn’t do anything evil to them as He leads them on the path of life). This phrase conveys the idea of being led along safe pathways, in both an ethical and theological sense, implying that the pathways along which God leads have to do with obedience to both the moral will and the sovereign will of God. The Psalm celebrates that our lives are ultimately under the sovereign control of God, and it is He who directs our lives, ensuring we remain on the right path. David does not address here how God’s guidance is manifested. From other portions of Scripture, we know that sometimes God guides us through His word, and at other times through the way He orchestrates the circumstances of our lives.

Some scholars suggest that the translation “*faithfulness*” better captures the idea that David was expressing here. However, there is little linguistic evidence to support this translation. However, it is true that God’s faithfulness, though not directly spoken about in this Psalm, is a foundational truth upon which the sentiments of the Psalm rest. God can continue to be trusted because He is ever faithful to do what He has promised to do.

Just as a genuinely good human shepherd knows the right paths on which to bring his sheep home safely. So too Yahweh knows the best and most beneficial path on which to lead His people. He will not fail to bring them to their destination, and He will take care of all their needs along the way.

David wrote that God leads His people along the right way, “*for His name’s sake*”. Throughout the Old Testament the idea of God’s name is associated with the revelation of who He is, both to believers and unbelievers. Therefore, the word “*name*” relates to the idea of God’s reputation, or how He is known (Ps.20:1). During the time of the exodus God made a point of saying that various things He did were done so that both He and things about Himself might be known. Here the idea is that God will faithfully lead His people along the right way because to do so is consistent with His character, and that in doing this, His faithful and gracious nature will be revealed to the human beings who witness how He leads His people.

In verse four David wrote, “*Yea, 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 reader should observe that at this point in the Psalm, David ceased **referring to** God (reflected in the use of the third person) and instead began **speaking directly to** God (reflected in the use of the second person). In this verse, the first matter that needs to be interpreted is understanding what David meant by the expression “*the valley of the shadow of death*”? One interpretation that has been somewhat popular among Pastors is that the expression refers to a specific place that in David’s time was known by this designation and was also known to be a dangerous place. However, though this is a popular idea among some, there is no

archeological evidence to support that there was a place designated by that name in David's time. The only evidence we have is that this designation was used many centuries later therefore, the above interpretation is erroneous. The Hebrew wording we find here is used elsewhere in the following ways in the OT:

- (Amos 5:8) to refer to the deep darkness of night
- (Job 24:17) it refers to thick darkness
- (Jer.2:16) it refers figuratively to extreme danger
- (Jer.13:16) it is used figuratively to refer to distress

Based on this usage, it seems that the expression could refer either to any literal place that was dark and dangerous, or it could be used to refer metaphorically to a situation that was dark and dangerous. When used figuratively, the imagery does not refer only to near-death dangers that one might face, but to any perilous situation in which one is tempted to be afraid. Given that the entire Psalm is made of metaphorical imagery, it is almost certain that this reference is also intended metaphorically, and thus it refers in general to any seriously frightening situation that a person might face. The imagery itself comes from the geographic reality that in the hill country of Judah one finds narrow and precipitous ravines or wadis. These are difficult to descend into and ascend out of. These "*valleys*" are dark, gloomy places that are abounding in caves. In David's time these valleys were places where wild animals and robbers were inclined to hide and thus, they were potentially dangerous places for shepherds and their sheep. So, in the imagery of the Psalm, these valleys represent the fearful situations that a person encounters in life. And David was expressing here that it was Yahweh's presence with him that made all the difference in his perspective when he was in dangerous or frightening situations. David was not afraid in these situations (like when he faced Goliath) because Yahweh was with him. Elaborating on this idea, David then referred to God's "*rod*" and "*staff*". Of course, the reference to the "*rod*" and "*staff*" are metaphors since God does not literally use such tools (with the implied comparisons being with literal human shepherds). The "*rod*" was a club worn at the belt, and was used to defend the sheep from predators, while the "*staff*" was a walking implement that doubled as a weapon in time of need. It was also often used to guide and control the sheep. These were traditional tools of the shepherd in that era. This imagery was intended to picture the care and the protection that God provides for His people. The idea of God being with David, and by application with us, is not merely the idea of God being present everywhere, nor does it represent a warm feeling we have at the thought, rather it conveys the reality that God actively protects His people from things that would otherwise do them genuine harm. It is part of God's promise that nothing can touch our lives that will not be used for the good purposes God has for our us (Rom.8:28). It involves believers recognizing that they are never in situations that God is not aware of, nor are they ever truly at risk, for He never leaves or forsakes His people (Heb.13:5). Therefore, in light of the Shepherd's guidance, provision and protection David expressed that he was left with nothing to fear, and the implication is that no genuine believer ever needs to be afraid, if they trust God. The Hebrew word translated here as "*comfort*" is better

rendered as instilling courage. Believers can be free of anxiety and fear because our faith in God's presence with us gives us courage. David was saying that God's people do not need to be afraid that some awful thing will happen to them (that their worst fears will be realized). Why, because God Himself is with them to protect them. As a shepherd would guard his sheep with his life, so Yahweh the Almighty is with us to keep us safe.

III. Praising Yahweh for Always Being Present With Us: (vs.5-6)

At the beginning of verse five we read, "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*" (vs.5a). With this verse the scene depicted in the Psalm changes from a description of a shepherd to a description of a gracious host who is providing a banquet to which David is a guest. The imagery conveys the hospitality that would be expected on the part of a king or great man in the ancient Near East. The expression "*prepare a table*" meant to lay out food and drink for one's guests to enjoy. There has been a great deal of speculation regarding what sort of banquet we are meant to visualize here. The most popular suggestion is that this represented a thanksgiving feast eaten in the sanctuary. However, the reality is that there isn't enough information given to indicate what sort of setting and circumstances David intended his readers to recognize. Therefore, it is better to assume that the language is intentionally general because no specific setting was intended, rather David was simply comparing the expressions of God's goodness to any sort of lavish feast provided by a wealthy and gracious host. The point was to picture in a second way the lavish provisions that God intends to shower upon His people. The reference to enemies at the banquet continues one of the principal themes of the Psalm, God's provision of security. The reference to enemies at the table pictures the presence of some at the banquet who are antagonistic to David. But, according to the customs of the day, an honored guest would be safe at such a banquet because a host was responsible for protecting his guests at all costs. Therefore, the host would be duty bound to do whatever was necessary to keep his guest safe. This imagery then does not picture a genuinely dangerous scenario, rather it pictures a situation where one's enemies are in a controlled environment where they don't have the freedom to pose a threat. Therefore, though David had real enemies who were in some way genuinely dangerous to him, because God was with him, that danger was neutralized because God would not allow those enemies to act on their evil inclinations.

In the latter portion of verse five we read, "*You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over*" (vs.5b). Those at a banquet in the ancient world were often treated by a generous host to fine oils that would be used to anoint their foreheads. This provided not only a glistening sheen to their countenance but also would have added a fragrance to their persons and the room. Oils also preserved the complexion in the hot Middle Eastern climate. Therefore, this was done to make the guest comfortable, alleviating discomfort from the harsh conditions outside. The idea of the "*cup*" represented the wine that would be served to refresh the guest. The reference to it running over simply means that the cup was filled to the point of

flowing over, thus picturing abundant provision by the host for his guest. The imagery of a “*cup*” is used in the Bible as a symbol of one’s lot in life (and can be used to refer to either good or bad fortune that awaits the individual). In this case it refers to God richly providing for His people throughout their lives and regardless of their situations, simply because they are objects of His generosity and care.

Next David wrote, “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*” (vs.6a). The Hebrew word translated as “*surely*” is used to indicate a transition in the Psalm, where David turned from his reflections upon the goodness of God to express the conclusion he had come to in his life, his conclusion was that the knowledge of these things motivated him to have a deeper communion with God.

The Hebrew word translated as “*goodness*” refers to that which promotes, protects, and enhances life. And the Hebrew word translated as “*mercy*” (*hesed*) speaks of the loyal covenant love of God. These two terms “*goodness*” and “*love*” form what is called a hendiadys (an expression where two words connected with the conjunction “*and*” are used to express a single idea—as in the English expression “*good and hot*”). Used in this way, the words express the idea that David knew that the goodness of God’s love was always with him. The emphasis then is on the benefit that David enjoyed because of God’s love. The term “*hesed*” does not refer to a spontaneous, unmotivated goodness, but to a kind of behavior that arises from a relationship which has rights and obligations. In other words, God’s love is not directed toward an individual because of something they do in a given moment, rather His love is directed toward them because of the covenantal commitment God has made to His people. The Hebrew word translated as “*follow*” would be better translated as “*pursue*” as it consistently conveys an action more energetic than simply following. It is frequently used to describe a vicious predator or a determined enemy doggedly pursuing someone. Therefore, the domesticated translation “*follow*” fails to communicate the tenacity of God’s commitment to His people. The idea that a believer can never go anywhere that will result in them being separated from God’s love (Rom.8:35-39). And God’s commitment to each person who is His, will last throughout his or her life in this world.

In the final clause of the Psalm we read, “*and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever*” (vs.6b). In order to understand what David was saying here we need to understand two key parts of this clause. First, what precisely is “*the house of the LORD*”? Most often this wording was used to refer to the sanctuary where God’s presence dwelt on earth, first in the Tabernacle, and then later in the Temple. However, a few times the expression is used to refer to a place distinct from those sanctuaries. This expression was used to refer to the place where God revealed Himself to Jacob (Gen.28:17), so some conclude that this could be a general reference to any place designated as sacred because it was a place to worship Yahweh. Finally, many scholars are convinced that this word is never used in the Old Testament to refer to God’s heavenly dwelling place. The second question is, what is the precise meaning of the Hebrew expression translated as “*forever*”? Though the English translation is unambiguous, it is also highly interpretive. Literally, the expression means “*length of days*”. It is used elsewhere to refer to an

extended period of time (Lam.5:20). Because of this, and because of the context, some scholars conclude that the expression refers to however long David would be alive. However, there are other scholars who argue that this was intended as a reference to eternity (as the translation “*forever*” suggests). So, the verse could be saying one of two things. It could be saying that David would be dwelling continually at the sanctuary of the Tabernacle for the rest of his life (it couldn’t be a reference to the Temple for that would not be built until after David’s death). The problem with this interpretation is that we must understand this in the sense that he would go to the sanctuary intermittently, because David was not continually at the sanctuary during his lifetime. This interpretation seems to strain even a poetic sense of the phrase. Therefore, it is better to accept the second way this statement could be interpreted. That is, to take the second stanza of the verse as a couplet with the first stanza, where the first speaks of how God’s loving presence would be with David throughout his lifetime, and the second stanza complements that idea by saying that after his death David would dwell eternally with God in His heavenly abode. This latter view, though less popular now among scholars, has been the traditional conservative view for most of Christian history.

Conclusion:

The application is that the modern believer is to recognize that God’s loving commitment to his or her well-being is continually with them, and therefore there is no reason for anxiety or fear, rather what is needed is for us to put our confident trust in God’s promises. And as we do this, we anticipate that one day faith will turn to experience, because when this life is over, we will dwell eternally in the presence of God enjoying His unfiltered goodness, and we will be set free from all the miseries that plague us in this life.

But it is important to note how the idea of faith is presented in Scripture. Some who hear that fear represents a lack of faith will conclude that this means they are faithless. However, absolute faithlessness is at one extreme end of the spectrum of the degree of faith that an individual can possess. The other end of that spectrum is perfect faith (which only Jesus possessed). Between these two opposites lies many degrees of faith, from weak to strong. Unbelief or faithlessness is not believing at all. Weak faith is still real faith, it is just something that needs to grow, and that is precisely why God sends trial into our lives (Jas.1:4-8). Therefore, the reminder that fear represents a lack of faith is not meant to discourage us, it is meant to challenge us to seek to grow in our faith, something that God will enable us to do as we consciously choose to act in faith in the midst of the trials we encounter in life. As we do this, we are meant to meditate on the goodness of our Shepherd who will enable us to succeed as we remind ourselves that He will protect and care for us.