

God's Care

Psalms 23:1-6

FIRST THOUGHTS

The Roman philosopher Lucius Apuleius is credited with being the first to say, "Familiarity breeds contempt." It means people can become so familiar with something that they begin to lose appreciation for it; they start taking it for granted. There are few Bible passages more recognized than Psalm 23. In one sense, this familiarity is a good thing. In another sense, such a familiarity with the psalm may result in a failure to carefully examine and appreciate the gold mine that is Psalm 23.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

King David wrote Psalm 23, but the exact setting in which he penned it cannot be determined. He could have written it after the Lord led him through a particularly difficult ordeal victoriously. His reflection on what he experienced along the way produced gratitude in his heart. In turn, he wrote a simple, but profound, tribute to the Lord who cared for him.

The word pictures in the psalm resonated with God's people who lived in those days. They knew how shepherds worked with their flocks. Therefore, they could relate to the image of a shepherd that David incorporated into the psalm. And, of course, David knew what shepherding involved since he grew up tending to his father's sheep (1 Sam. 16:11).

Centuries later, Jesus used the image of a shepherd in His instruction. He called Himself the Good Shepherd and contrasted a shepherd who cared for his flock with a hireling who ignored the needs of the sheep (John 10:11-13).

GOD'S PROVISION (PSALM 23:1-3)

The Lord is my shepherd: David pointed to God by using the holiest name in the Hebrew language (Yahweh, spelled Lord). The name suggested God's eternal existence and His sovereignty in making everything exist. He compared the extraordinary God to an ordinary shepherd. David humbly acknowledged his role as a sheep under the authority of my shepherd.

I have what I need: The Hebrew phrase related to emptiness or deprivation. With God, neither of these is an issue. His flock has nothing to fear when it comes to provision. As a shepherd himself, David knew what it meant to take care of a flock. On their own, sheep are helpless and defenseless. They need everything the shepherd can provide. Thinking about God as a shepherd nourished confidence that He would meet the needs of His people. (See also John 14:14; 15:7.)

Green pastures: The dry climate in Israel only allowed for patches of grass here and there. A caring shepherd would always look for meadows with enough grass to feed his flock. These **green pastures** would give the sheep a safe place for them to take nourishment without being frightened.

Quiet waters: Like grass, water also could be in short supply. Therefore, a shepherd would search for an adequate source of water for the sheep. In his search, he faced another challenge. Sheep often were startled easily by running water. To provide **quiet waters**, shepherds often used walls of rocks to build a tranquil pool where the sheep could drink.

He renews: The Hebrew word for **renews** (shub) suggests turning back or being returned. It paints a picture of a sheep wandering from the flock. A caring shepherd would notice that it had strayed and would search for it. Once he found the sheep, he would lead it back to the flock.

Right paths: The shepherd's care involved guidance as well as restoration. The flock couldn't see where a path would take them, but the shepherd knew exactly which **paths** to take. God's people affirm His wisdom when they follow His leadership (Prov. 4:11). By following His guidance, they become people of integrity (14:2).

His name's sake: Shepherds earned a good name with their reputations. If they diligently cared for their sheep, people understood that they were reliable. They had a good name. However, if they ignored the flock, their reputations suffered along with the sheep. Similarly, the Lord's good name was honored because He led His people well. His guidance wasn't just for their benefit. He also did it for **his name's sake**. He wanted His people—His flock—to serve as a testimony to Him and His character.

GOD'S PROTECTION (PSALM 23:4)

The darkest valley: The picture painted by David here has provided immense comfort to believers for centuries. It has helped hurting and grieving people navigate life's most difficult challenges. His description had the shepherd in front of his flock. Of course, he knew the dark path well, but the darkness had a haunting tendency to frighten his sheep. Even though he led them down the right path, he didn't prevent them from going into the **darkest valley**.

Fear no danger: Along with God's provision, David affirmed His protection. As he encountered serious troubles in his life, he felt certain that no danger would come to him. The Hebrew word for "danger" (ra') can also be translated as "evil." It suggests serious harm, but the term was used broadly in the Old Testament.

You are with me: The key to David's confidence was the abiding presence of the Lord. The knowledge that God was with me, prevented David from being frightened by the ordeals he faced. Isaiah encouraged God's people to rest in the certainty of His abiding presence. He assured them that the Lord would take them through perilous circumstances (Isa. 43:1-2).

Your rod...Your staff: Shepherds carried two important tools. The first was a **rod**, which was a straight stick of wood that also could serve as a club. A shepherd, like David as a young man, would use it to defend the flock against predators like bears or lions (1 Sam. 17:34-37). The other tool was a **staff**, a longer stick that had a crook at the end of it. A shepherd used a staff to guide sheep and to keep them under his control. Shepherds also used a staff to rescue sheep that had fallen into ravines or gotten tangled in thickets of weeds or vines.

GOD'S CARE (PSALM 23:5-6)

You prepare: Turning from the image of the Lord as a shepherd, David began to think of Him as the attentive host of a banquet. Spiritually speaking, the Lord filled the banquet table with plenty of delicious food that He prepared Himself. The shift from a shepherd to a host came abruptly in the psalm. However, the Lord's loyal love, provision, and protection remained the central themes of both images.

My enemies: David portrayed the Lord as a host who did not forget anything when it came to hospitality. He prepared the banquet, and He also provided safety to his guests so they could enjoy themselves without fear of being attacked. David had many enemies as he reigned over the kingdom of Israel. The possibility of enjoying a banquet meal and being protected from them underscored the Lord's careful attention and protection.

You anoint: In another act of hospitality hosts would anoint the heads of banquet guests. The olive oil poured onto the scalp provided refreshing relief to guests who traveled long distances in the hot, dry climate. The Lord as banquet host demonstrates His care for His people by giving them a refreshing sense of His presence.

My cup overflows: In those days, the banquet host made sure to keep the cups of the guests filled to the brim. A cup that **overflows** served as a fitting description of the Lord's lavish grace to His people. David used the description in other psalms as a testimony to God's grace (Ps. 16:5) and deliverance (116:13).

Goodness and faithful love: David mentioned two expressions of the Lord's care that he depended on for his future. God's **goodness** and His **faithful love** would be loyal friends who would never grow tired of pursuing him wherever life took him.

I will dwell: As David looked into the future, he rejoiced over the promise of God's ongoing presence. Dwelling in the house of the Lord suggested never living apart from His presence. David's affirmation about God's house assured His people that He will never abandon the sheep of His pasture.

Next Week – God's Greatness, Psalm 139:1-4, 7-16