

Psalms: God's Worship & Prayer Guide

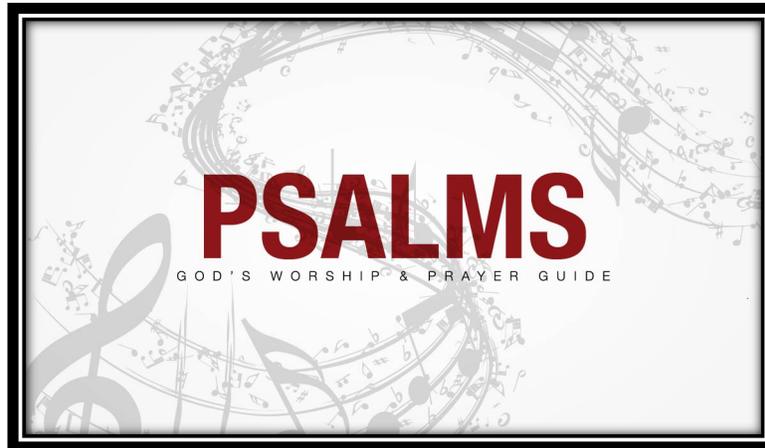
The Shepherd And His Sheep

Selected Texts

Written By

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For some thirty-one years, give or take a few here and there when the growing church plant worshipped in homes or in schools, we have enjoyed wonderful, moving worship in this what used to be a gym. Old pictures put these years in perspective, do they not? In many respects, much has changed. Gone are suits, ties and dress shoes, for the most part, and *in* are casual, comfortable clothes. Gone are what were once cutting edge worship choruses, and *in* are new tunes with new words. Gone are the big, blue drapes, the shaky temporary/portable stage, and *in* is this beautiful one constructed several years ago. Gone are hymnals and overhead projectors, and *in* are words and images projected in color on massive screens. Gone are women wearing long dresses to worship, and *in* are, well, other types of attire more suited for the contemporary age. Indeed, much has changed in this old worship center.

Much, however, has not changed over the years. The living, resurrected Lord Jesus is still worshipped, the Word of God is still upheld, defended, and taught with precision and power, the Spirit still works in and through the worship and the Word, lives are changed for time and eternity, Christ's death, burial and resurrection are remembered per His command, saints give of their time and treasures to the Lord who has given them so much, and the gospel is preached with conviction.

In light of this rich heritage, how do you say good-bye to this old worship center where God has touched thousands of lives? I, personally, find the answer to that all-important query from the pen of King David in Psalm 23. Looking back thoughtfully over his life of rich intimacy with God, David contemplatively paused and formulated a Psalm of all psalms, replete with a now lost tune with rich, graphically driven, and memorable words. Thousands of years later, believers and non-believers are quite familiar with this particular psalm. People, like my mother-in-law,

claimed it was her favorite as she faced her own mortality. Marines on landing barges headed to the shell-pocked black beaches of Iwo Jima quoted it as they sailed through choppy blue waters, waiting for the protective gate to be lowered. Teens going into surgery have quoted it with their parents to sooth and calm their fears. Seniors who just received less-than-optimal medical news have uttered these words to give them strength for the possible rough road ahead.

Why? Why is this psalm THE psalm? It stands head and shoulders above the other psalms because of its main idea. In six short verses, David drives home this memorable motif:

Remember And Be Renewed (Psalm 23)

Remember what? Remember three things: *God's Person* (Psalm 23:1a), *God's Provision* (Psalm 23:1b-5), and *God's Plan* (Psalm 23:6). Remembering who God is, by definition, brings solace and comfort to the soul beaten and beleaguered by the storms and gale force winds of life. Remembering who He is logically leads to seeing how He provided to those whom He loves. Anyone who knows Him can readily look back over their spiritual life and readily identify just how God has reached down from the heavens and taken care of them. All of this, of course, culminates, as David demonstrates in verse 6, with a desire to have a lasting, deep, and ongoing intimate relationship with the living God, a communion which nothing in this life can tarnish or diminish.

As such, this psalm forms a fitting "good-bye" to what God has accomplished in this worship center over the years. By means of remembering His *person* and *provision* we understand how He sought to always mature our individual and corporate worship of Him. That was always His *plan*, and as we look to the future with a new, larger worship center we will quickly realize God's desire is unchanging. He never wants us to forget the warm, memorable image of who He is toward His saints, nor does He want us to forget how He is always there for us. And at the end of the day, He wants both of these concepts to move us into deeper, more intimate worship of Him corporately and individually. So, let us remember these twin concepts and be renewed and rejuvenated in our adoration of Him.

Remember God's Person (Psalm 23:1a)

After identifying himself as the author/composers, David gives us one of the most memorable, heart-warming, and comforting descriptions of the living God in the Bible:

¹ A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

In Hebrew, there is no article before LORD and God's name is placed at the head of the sentence to create a powerful emphasis. The emphasis is made more pronounced by the ellipsis of the main copula, "is." This stilted, wooden grammatical format leaves the reader/listener with only one option: to pause and *strongly* consider who God is toward His people.

First, He is the LORD, or Yahweh, the great covenant giving and keeping divine One. This title, as we have noted before, is derived from the verbal formula God chose for His grand name to give to Israel in Exodus 3:14,

¹⁴ And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exod. 3).

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲהַנֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהַנֶּה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲהַנֶּה שְׁלֹתָנִי
אֲלֵיכֶם:

The verbal form of “to be,” or *hayah* (הָיָה), informs us that God is ontologically the One who always is in a state a being, He is the eternal One who exists outside of time and space, who is transcendent yet immanent, and who is the uncaused eternal being who set our cause/effect cosmos in motion by the powerful word of His mouth (Gen. 1). He, who could be denoted as a majestic, unapproachable, lofty divine being, lovingly condescends to our lowly estate as terrestrial and temporal beings and inspires David to allow us, His people, His followers, to individually call Him “my shepherd.”

What mere mortal can ever begin to fathom the import of this divine metaphor? Is it not mind-numbing? Is it not highly humbling? Indeed. The eternal God, who possesses all-power, knowledge, and wisdom is, at the moment of faith, *your* personal shepherd. Yes, He who fashioned the spectacular molecular machine of the living cell containing a lipid membrane, which is made up of some 100 million complex proteins of 20,000 different types that can somehow be situated on the dot of an “i,” He desires to be called your Shepherd. Amazing. Cognitively staggering. Comforting, too. Why? Because the One who made you and all that is, is properly suited to know you and care for you like no other. Have you forgotten this? If so, let this remembrance rejuvenate your soul.

David, of course, knew much about this metaphor, having been a shepherd prior to being crowned Israel’s king (1 Sam. 16:11; 17:34). He knew the shepherd’s job description to a tee. A good shepherd must love his sheep, care for their various daily needs, bind their wounds, know their limitations and propensities, and protect them from would-be predators. Applied to God, these truths take on a much more robust meaning for His sheep. If an earthly shepherd like David can be these things, how more so the eternal, living God? This is a powerful version of an *argumentum a fortiori*, or an argument from the lesser to the greater where the lesser can be affirmed with greater force about the latter.

Jesus, who was and is God, showed us just how important this metaphor was and is when He made these statements in John:

¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. ¹² But a hireling, *he who is* not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd; and I know My *sheep*, and am known by My own (John 10).

Interesting. When Yahweh becomes the God-Man and He chooses a title, a metaphor to describe Himself toward His people, His sheep, He, as the Messiah from the Davidic line, says He is not just a shepherd, but THE Good Shepherd, meaning He will always do what a quality, dependable shepherd should do toward His sheep. Did I say always? Yes, I did.

Corporately, God has been our faithful shepherd in this place of worship. For many years, countless goats have wandered in here only to be lovingly confronted and convicted by the Shepherd of their souls. Many have, by faith in the Shepherd, traded being a goat for being a sheep. For many years, countless sheep have sat in these chairs to worship the LORD who is the Shepherd and that worship has been pleasing to Him. For many years, countless sheep have sat

in these chairs to have their souls fed spiritual food by the Shepherd who knew what they needed to eat in order to spiritually mature. For many years, God, as our Shepherd, has providentially guided us to follow His lead in everything from how we build this church to His glory to, to how we construct buildings to better reach goats and train sheep to know and follow Him, the Good Shepherd.

Today, we say thanks for our Shepherd for His provisions over the years, and we now look forward to many more years where we follow His leadership in a new worship environment. May He be praised by His sheep. May His position as our personal and corporate shepherd move us to inexorably trust Him, to fearlessly follow Him no matter what the culture throws at us, and to always look for sweet, quiet times wherein we can develop this unique and special relationship He has created for us.

When we remember God's person, we logically and naturally should think of His care for His sheep.

Remember God's Provision (Psalm 23:1b-5)

Interestingly enough, David employs two metaphors here to describe God's provision for His sheep. First, he speaks about God's provision as the Shepherd (vv. 2-4), and then he turns and presents God as the ultimate dinner host (vv.5-6a).

How does God, the quintessential shepherd, meet the needs of His sheep corporately and individually?

¹ A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.² He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.³ He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. ⁴ 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. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life . . .

"*I shall not want*," does not mean a sheep will not ever have times of physical want. David had great, troublesome times of want as King Saul, in a jealous rage hunted the would-be king. How many times had he and his choice soldiers hidden in dark, dank, dusty caves while also scrounging for food? Too many to count. How many times had Moses, another great shepherd of Israel, turned to God to provide food and water to the hungry, thirsty, and griping sheep of Israel? Too many to count. God, then, as we know, uses times of privation, problems, and persecution to hone the lives of His sheep to conform them to His lofty, holy image. Jesus, THE Shepherd actually warns His sheep that they will experience trouble will on earth (John 16:33).

What is David getting at here, then? Simply put, the wise king is saying, "With God as your Shepherd you will never have an instance in the life of your church or personal life where He will fail miserably to give you quality, personal, well-thought-out care. Never." Think of Stephen's martyrdom as a case study. The Shepherd gave him not only the words to speak to the blood-thirsty religious Jewish leaders, but at the moment the rocks pounded his defenseless body, God permitted him to peer into the glory of heaven and see the glory of God, and the Shepherd standing to receive him. Though blood stained the sandy soul that fateful day, Stephen had no want for the Shepherd of his soul gave him much comfort by means of a personal peak into his heavenly destination.

Corporately, the same has been true for us. We have had trouble inside and outside the church since our inception, but we have NEVER failed to secure and see the providential provision of the Shepherd. The same will be true of the future. God has and will provide for us in our new worship environment as His name is praised and the Word is preached with power and conviction. Individually, the same applies too. No matter what you are facing, or have faced, or will face, the Shepherd's care will always be timely and evidentiary if you pay attention.

“² *He makes me to lie down in green pastures,*” must, as with the other statements in these verse, be read in light of the climax of David's observations in verse 6. All of these concepts and truths should lead a sheep to desire to worship in God's temple more often than not. Seen in this contextual light, “green pastures,” denote, first and foremost, the abundant spiritual food available to sheep while attending a worship service in the Temple. Songs are sung and the Word of God is read, taught, and applied. From what we know in the New Testament, the Bible is food for the soul (1 Cor. 3; Heb. 5:12-14), and when it is taught and preached to the sheep by a faithful shepherd/pastor (2 Tim. 4:2), the sheep secure rest and food for their souls so they are equipped to head out into a land where the grass is not always green.

Have God's sheep not been adequately feed in this place of worship? Has the full revelation of God, from Genesis to Revelation not been proclaimed? Has the Bible not been related to current cultural issues? Have not worn out, troubled saints who fight the world, the flesh, and the Devil during the week, not come in here and felt like they were getting some much needed spiritual rest while eating food to energize them to go back out and be salt and light? Have not Christian marriages on the edge, not been rejuvenated as countless couples feasted on the marriage-building truths embedded in the Word? Have not an innumerable amount of sheep not sat here and been so touched by the music they felt comforted and fed so they could take on the world one more week? Yes, to all of these questions. The Good Shepherd historically has sovereignly made His sheep see the value of being in this place for corporate worship, and the sheep have heard Him and shown up in profound numbers. Trust me, this wonderful pasture will be just as restful and powerful when we change locations; however, for now, we pause to give God thanks for how beneficial this pasture has been over the years.

“*He leads me beside the still waters,*” speaks of a place of peace and rest. Think of how calm Burke Lake is across the street, and how calming it is to sit on a bench located around the lake. As we all know from experience, sitting next to a category five river is not as relaxing and refreshing as sitting on the shoreline of a placid lake. My time this summer at Lake Tahoe is a case study. Having quiet time with the Word and with God, as small waves lapped on the cool, grainy brown sand served to energize my tired soul. No doubt, the divine Shepherd knows you need times where your marginless, driven, fast-paced life stops and enjoys moments of solitude and silence. It is here, as we read in Psalm 46, that we learn about God in the stillness.

Contextually, however, we need to remember that David is focused on the Temple. Since God, the Shepherd, is “the fountain of living waters” (Jer. 2:13), and (from a NT perspective) the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is the “water of life” (John 4:11-14), it is highly likely David is saying how coming near God in corporate worship is something akin to sitting down near a quiet, calm, beautiful lake. Just last week, one of our parishioners who has not been in worship with us since the onset of COVID, came with her family. Talking with her after worship, she informed me of how emotional and refreshing it was to sit and sing with God's people in God's presence. That, my friend, is what David is talking about. Granted, there are other places where God provides for your respite, but worship, most certainly, tops the proverbial list.

“³ *He restores my soul; . . .*” is a Polel imperfect in Hebrew denoting an habitual action, or customary action on God's part. The verb lexically means to return something damaged to its

former state. Hence, it is used in 1 Kings 13:6 for the ‘restoration of a withered hand,’ and in Daniel 9:25, it speaks of rebuilding of a broken down protective wall of an ancient city. Why would sheep need the restorative powers of the omnipotent, loving Shepherd? That is a sermon series in and of itself. Lose a loved one or two, or battle with cancer treatment, or engage godless digressive people at work, or deal with a combative and controlling non-Christian husband, or find yourself single and without a mate at 45 years-of-age with no viable godly choices in sight, wrestle with a debilitating addiction, and you will know what I mean.

How does the Shepherd of your soul restore your battered and bruised soul? Again, this is another sermon series (job security for pastors like me). The short answer is based on the context. Since corporate worship is in David’s mind in verse six, we must, at first blush, surmise that rich, meaningful worship always serves to mend and repair those facets of your life which were assailed during the week. Again, what sheep has not over the last thirty-one years, not come into this house of worship and not sensed the Spirit of God descend on you in a profound, moving, restorative fashion? Who has not had a worship song work like a healing balm of your soul? Can you name the tune and when this happened? Many can, I am sure. This truth is all the more reason why God’s sheep should be in worship of and with Him more often than not.

“*He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake,*” *Path* here, in Hebrew, is the word for wagon tracks or wheel ruts, so readily seen either in green grass, or out in the open rocky soil (Psalm 65:12; Isa. 26:7). What does this mean? In relationship to worship, which is David’s focus, as I have said, God makes sure you know exactly what is required for you to live a holy, godly life. The plurality of paths underscores how God speaks most profoundly through the Word to teach each of us what path, or paths, we must surrender to Him, and which path we should embark on to become more righteous.

This is the power of the Word (Hebrews 4:12) and preaching and teaching. Combined they show you the wrong way of the world, the tenuous and false nature of worldly thinking, while also pointing you to the path which leads to the kind of living the Shepherd, who is holy, finds most excellent. Once again, to attend worship is to walk away with a better understanding of your sin, which direction God desires your “wagon” to go, and how exactly you should go about heading there. Has this happened to you? It has for me many times as a pastor and a parishioner. Thank God for a worship center there the path of righteousness is most clear, when we live and move in Christless culture awash in false, tenuous views of morality. And note well how God does this first and foremost “for His name’s sake.” His reputation is on the line in this regard of making sure you know what is righteous behavior, which ostensibly means He will not ever fail to point you in the right direction. Your free will choice, as a sheep, will be whether you will follow or not. I trust you will walk in the right path(s) for this is where the blessing of God resides.

“⁴ *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me. . .*” is a reminder that because the Shepherd is the author of life and possesses unlimited power there is no need to ever fear death. What is death to the One who is the Resurrection and the Life but a mere shadow, and who was ever assailed by something as intangible as this? No one. And since the Shepherd is always with us (Psalm 139:7-12), no matter what, there is absolutely nothing to fear. Not even the prospects of death can shake us for we know what lies beyond the grave, and we know the One who has defeated the grave. Once more, our exposure to worship reminds us through song and the Word we have nothing to fear:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;

I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.

Refrain:

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.

When darkness veils His lovely face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.

How thankful we should all be that we have a Shepherd who walks through the valley of death *with us* when that time comes. And because this is true, we should be full of hope and completely fearless.

“*Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me . . .*” are two interesting tools of the Shepherd. The rod could be used as a weapon to challenge a predator, or it could be used to part the wool of a given sheep to discover the possible presence of disease. A staff could also be used, if needed to protect sheep, was typically used to guide them as the Shepherd pressed it against their woolly sides, or in a case of danger, the Shepherd could use the crook to rescue a wayward, lost sheep. Biblically, I think the rod speaks of the power of the Word of God:

¹¹ Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. ¹³ And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account (Heb. 4).

The word grabs our attention, especially in worship, and shows us our motives as to why we do what we do. It also shows us how far we are, in a given action or decision, from the path of God. It parts our wool, as it were, and shows us where the disease is which need confession and repentance. The staff, conversely, functions like the Spirit of God, who not only brings conviction of sin, but He works to save us by helping us produce fruit for God (Gal. 5:22). No wonder there is comfort for the saint. The whole Trinity is, in a sense, at work guiding, protecting, and providing for you on your earthly journey.

⁵ *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; . . .*” is an interesting picture of the LORD. Here it switches, in David’s mind, from a Shepherd to a Host. What does this metaphor as applied to God mean? It means that even though you will face many enemies in your life, God is so sure He will protect and care for you it is as if prepares a meal for you to enjoy when your enemies are locked on taking you out. Ironic, is it not? The world, the flesh, and the Devil are arrayed against you on any given day, and it seems like in our day they are working overtime; however, in the meantime, God has prepared a banquet typically wedded to worship and the Word for you to feast on so you will be equipped to fight these forces of darkness most effectively. What a beautiful way to think about our worship services over the last thirty-one years. They are, in many respects, like a gorgeous, sumptuous banquet of the best spiritual food a sheep could

ever feast on. Thanks be to God, again, for a church which serves up the meals. There will be more to come in the new worship venue, for sure.

“*You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over . . .*” are two concepts wedded to a Jewish meal. Guests typically had their heads anointed with oil by the host as a sign of great joy, and cups, of course, which ran over were an expression of bounty and rich blessing. Here I would take the oil as the presence of the anointing of the Spirit of God, first given to the Church at Pentecost (Acts 2), but most certainly poured out on us as we submit to His leadership in our lives (Eph. 5:18). With this imagery, God reminds us that no matter what we face in life, He will be there, like a perfect host, to touch our lives with His joy so we can enjoy life to the fullest. And He will also work in such a fashion to not just bless us a little, but to bless us to where our cups are full to overflowing.

As a church, can we not say He has made our joy full in this place of worship many times? Can we not say we are blessed beyond measure? Indeed, our cup runs over with blessings, be they numerous lives touched and changed for eternity, or tithes which have been given to pay for our new worship facility. How joyous His provision is! How humbling to have your cup running over with His blessing! What a good Host is He.

“*6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life . . .*” introduce us to the last two provisions of the LORD to His sheep and guests. He promises that no matter what life hurls at you, no matter how hard the path is, no matter what cost you pay for being a saint, no matter what the loss, you have His word and promise that you will live to see His goodness toward you, and you will experience His loyal love. The ol’ Devil would have you focus on the fight, while God wants you to focus on what is trailing behind you. Where there is badness, there is always good coming up the path. Where there is disloyalty and desertion, there is always a God full of loyal love to come and love on you when you need Him most. Bank on it. Count on it. Remember it. Why? As you remember God’s person and His provision, you naturally are led to . . .

Remember God’s Plan (Psalm 23:6a)

What is His plan in our lives? Here is how David answers the question:

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Ps. 23)



Understanding who God is and all the ways He cares daily for His people, should cause those people to long for even more intimate communion with Him. Further, it should give them a taste of what lies ahead when we get to worship the Shepherd and Host face to face for all eternity in THE Temple, of which the earthly temples were but faint images.

David could not have been clearer in what remembering God’s person and provision does for a saint. It rejuvenates his soul, causing him to want to spend even more time in God’s holy presence with God’s people.

Thank God for a building such as this where many weary sheep secured the strength they needed to move onward and upward for God in godless times. Thank God for a building such as this which on many occasions gave us a small taste of what communion will be like in God’s awesome presence.

Now, we look forward to the same Shepherd and Host will deepen and mature all of us as we head to a new house of worship. May He get the glory there that He most certainly secured here.