

Experiencing God in Times of Crisis

Crises are a part of life. Some are global. Tsunamis, 9/11, hurricanes. Others are local. Cancer, divorce, bankruptcy. But here's the question, is it possible to experience God in the midst of that kind of catastrophe? Is it possible to experience God when you're in deep crisis, whether it's a hurricane, a tsunami, a child with cancer, or a marriage that is breaking a part? How do you experience God in the midst of your deepest crises?

The question in life is not will we go through difficult times. You are going to have them. I am going to have them. Some of you have been through them. You'll have more. Some haven't had any real bad times. Fasten your seat belt. They will come. It's a fallen world. The question is will we go through them alone? Will we go with a stiff upper lip? You know, act like it's ok. Will we be crushed under their weight? Will we give up in despair? Will we go into denial like so many people do when it gets tough? Will we become bitter or resentful to God or other people? Or, here's the last option, will we experience the peace and the power of God in ways beyond our wildest dreams? That is God's desire. In a crisis, He knows that it's a fallen world. Good things happen to good people. Bad things happen to good people. We are going to turn to the most classic, well-known portion of scripture in all of the world. Before we look at it, do me a favor. Don't get into that mindset, oh isn't it beautiful, what nice poetry, doesn't it have a cute message? It's one of those things that is so familiar where if you are not careful you will nod your head as we go through this scripture and say, "Oh yeah, the Lord is my shepherd." He is your shepherd, but what does that mean? What does it really mean for Him to show up when you go through life's most difficult times and you really need him the most?

With that in mind, turn with me to Psalm 23. As we do, I want to just read it through and ask you to listen with new ears. Here is the way to listen with new ears. I want you in the white board of your mind, to pull out a dry erase marker, and say if I had to write down the biggest thing that could come up in my life as a crisis right now, what would it be? Maybe it's someone you know that has a crisis. Put that up there and use that to think through this scripture. Maybe there is a relationship that is in crisis, or maybe there is something in the future that you see brewing, or maybe it's something with one of your kids, or maybe it's financial, or maybe the biggest crisis that you have is your job. I don't know what it is. But I want you to listen to what I am about to read with that crisis in view rather than listening to this scripture as this flowing piece of poetry that you probably have heard a thousand times over the years.

23 The LORD (notice that is in all capital letters, that means Yahweh, the covenant God) is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth 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 thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This particular passage of scripture is written in a metaphor. A sheep and a shepherd. That is really great but let me ask all of you a question. Show of hands, how many people in here have ever shepherded sheep? We have a major problem here. Over 200 times in the Bible, we as believers are referred to as sheep. The last time I have been close to a sheep was probably at a petting zoo. Translation: I don't know anything about sheep. What I want you to know is that when a Hebrew

person heard this for the first time 3,000 years ago, it meant things to them. They had pictures come to their mind. There was an understanding of who God was that we can't grasp unless we get a picture of what a sheep is and who a shepherd is. So, let me just do a little background work before we dig in.

Sheep

Sheep have some interesting characteristics.

- Don't take this personally, but they are very slow. (Like running slow)
- But, they are also stupid. They are among the dumbest animals on the planet. Like I said, don't take it personally.
- They are defenseless.
- They are easily frightened. They don't even growl. When they are in danger they don't growl. They have zero defense mechanisms.
- They are not very clean. Unlike cats, and I know some of you don't like cats, myself included, but cats at least are clean. They are just licking themselves all of the time. Sheep are just dirty and smelly, and they pick up parasites easily.
- Are you ready for this? They cannot find food and water on their own. What kind of animal is that? Every other animal can find food on their own. Deer know where food is. Rabbits can find water. Sheep, if left by themselves, will stay in one place, eat until they eat all of the roots and ruin the land. And unless someone guides or leads them to another pasture, they will die.
- They are so easily frightened, that if there is a stream of water that has any sound to it, they will not go over to the stream and stick their head in it to get life giving water because they are afraid of the sound. That is why a good shepherd will often dam up a stream and create a hole or a quiet place where he can lead and guide the sheep where they can get to drink.

There are some parallels here. Now, before you get a little defensive and think, I'm a little offended that the Bible refers to me like that, let me give you a little contrast, and we will talk a little bit about what it meant to be a shepherd.

Shepherd

A shepherd was the lowliest job on the Hebrew totem pole.

- When you were in a Hebrew family, the lowest job was that you had to watch the sheep.
- You had to protect them.
- You had to lead them. You had a rod, an instrument that you stuck in your belt. It was used to kill wild animals, and any shepherd got to where they could literally sling and throw that thing and could literally knock out the attackers and the predators of the sheep.
- Then they had the staff, the big crook thing. Since the sheep were so dumb, they were always getting in big thorn bushes and wandering away. They use the crook of the staff to lift them up and pull them out of ravines, and every now and then, give them a little rap on the rear end and say, "hey, we are not doing that."

In light of all of that, notice the very first line before we get any farther. It says, the LORD is my Shepherd. There are a lot of names for God. This is Yahweh. This is the name He gave Abraham. It is literally, I am that I am, the transcendent one. It's the biggest picture of God we can get our arms

around. I am before all else. I am self-existent. I am self-sufficient. I am holy. I am above. I have unlimited resources. I am outside of time. I am eternal. Yahweh. But, notice then, the contrast that the Lord is not the shepherd, He is my shepherd. It may have been for the Hebrew mind, the most intimate, personal term ever given to God in the Old Testament because they understood the kind of relationship that a shepherd had with his sheep. They understood that a shepherd provides, protects, cares for, understands, nourishes and loves the sheep. It's a lonely job. It's a serving job. And here you have, in the first line, God's transcendence, His greatness, His power. He is truly great and holy and totally above all else. But, when it says He is my shepherd, the scripture also gives us a picture of His imminence (that means he is close), His tenderness, and how personal He is. What you see is that sheep are very vulnerable, but they are also very valuable.

A Hebrew home was sustained by sheep. You ate them. You made money by sheering the sheep to get their wool. So, what we have here, is an animal that is very vulnerable, but very valuable. And compared to the almighty transcendence of God, we are like sheep. In light of eternity, in light of making good decisions and living rightly, we are as dumb as a sheep. We are as vulnerable as a sheep, but to God, we are valuable, highly esteemed. And notice here also, the pronoun my, if you get bored, go home and take a pen, and circle all of the first-person personal pronouns. Over and over you see the words my, I, and me. This isn't a God who is way out there. This is a God who intricately and intimately cares about you and about me. And so, for the Hebrew mind, that's what it meant to be the Shepherd.

Notice that there are 3 statements here in this scripture. These 3 statements are positive affirmations that David has about his shepherd. These 3 things give us a picture of what it meant to David to have the Lord as his shepherd. When you, like David, allow the Lord to be your shepherd, you can say these three things (What does it mean for the Lord to be my Shepherd?):

1. I shall not want.
2. I will fear no evil.
3. I will dwell in the house of the Lord.

These are statements of confidence. David has been through it, he understands who God is. He has been in danger, has been in a crisis, and somewhere along the line, the Spirit of God has revealed to David the secret of having unshakeable confidence even in the midst of the most devastating crisis. When you have cancer, you can say, I will fear no evil. When there are financial problems on the horizon, you can say, I shall not want. When you feel insecure and afraid, you can say, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Now what I want to do in the next few minutes together, let's look at this psalm and figure out David's secrets. Why could he say that? What did he know about God. It's all right there in Psalm 23. The first thing that we want to look at is that the Lord is our Provider.

1. The first statement of absolute confidence is I shall not want. Why? Because the shepherd provides all my needs. That's the key word. David says I'm not going to be uptight. I know I'm not going to be in want, because the shepherd, my shepherd, the all-powerful, all knowing shepherd, he will provide. He is going to take care of all my needs. There are three key words that we are going to look at here and develop from the text that are going to show us that we are going to have all that we need. Here are the words:
 - a. Physical Needs
 - b. Psychological/Emotional Needs

c. Spiritual Needs

And what you are going to see in the first three verses is that God, the almighty and powerful God is committed to meeting your physical needs, your psychological/emotional needs, and your spiritual needs.

He says, The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. You see, sheep don't go to the best grass on their own. Notice the he says here in this verse that the Shepherd makes me to lie down. He will take you to places where you get physically nourished. It goes on to say that he leads us beside still or quiet waters. There has to be a meeting of needs, something that happens in the physical life of sheep before they can lie down. And these things blend together. These metaphors green lush pastures, quiet waters, restores our soul, leads us in paths of righteousness. It's not that one is physical, one is psychological, and one is spiritual. They all blend together. But you can see, as he gives us this picture. He says that God will meet your needs. He restores your soul.

The word restore there can mean repent or literally to be converted. The word for soul in Greek is psyche, where we get our word psychology, and in Hebrew it often means the whole person or self. Literally the idea is that God restores us. He takes our deepest needs, our deepest hurts and he restores us and puts it back together. He gives grace. He holds you up with something almost like an invisible hand. Then he goes on to talk about the spiritual issues. He guides me, He gives direction. Where? In paths of righteousness, or literally, the right path. What's right? What's wrong? What's true? What decisions should you make? Who should you marry? What job? Should you get involved in this or not? David is saying, look, there is a shepherd, he is all knowing, all powerful, and he loves you, and he wants you to know he will meet every need, not on your terms, not by your agenda, but he promises to meet your physical, psychological, and spiritual needs all the days of your life.

Now, he can do that if you let him be your shepherd. The other option is that you can say, you know something, I'm a pretty big sheep. I think I will go graze where I think that I can be fulfilled. I think I'll go hang out with other sheep or other animals where I think it will be fun. I think I will go to water and places and make decisions on my terms. What do we know if a physical sheep does that? They have big problems. You see, the biggest problems in our lives are not because God is mean, God is bad, and he doesn't really care about us. The biggest problem in my life is down deep in my heart, I am a very proud, arrogant person, and I want to be both the sheep, and I want to be my own shepherd. See, grace always flows toward humility, and humility is something hard for human sheep to swallow. To admit our need. That is what David does here.

That is not all that is happening here. Let me give you a new testament promise to look at. You say what is happening here in this Psalm is great for them, but what about me? I am part of the new covenant. I am a New Testament person and not an Old Testament person. Well, it's a good thing the New Testament speaks to this too. Phillipians 4:19, the apostle Paul writes to regular people like you and me. "But my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in

glory by Christ Jesus.” What is true then, I just want you to know is true know. I don’t know what is on the whiteboard of your mind, what the crisis is, I don’t know what the need is, but I want to tell you this, here’s a promise from God. You bring your life under the leadership of the shepherd, and He will meet your needs. Maybe not your way. Maybe not in your time. He may do a lot in you before he does something through you, but He promises He will meet you.

2. The next thing that we are going to look at is that the LORD is our Protector. It is one thing to be able to make a statement of confidence and say I shall not be in want. David knew when he looked at the future that he didn’t need to be uptight, but the second confident affirmation that he makes is a truly radical statement. He says I will fear no evil. I am not going to fear the evil of a fallen world. I’m not going to fear the evil of the enemy. I’m not going to fear the evil of my own flesh. I will fear no evil. Why? Look at the text. It’s because the shepherd protects me from all evil. He says when you understand that God is a shepherd, He not only is a provider, but He is also a protector. Notice that David goes on to say in verse 4, Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Why? For you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Let me give you 3 words to write down here. You do not have to fear evil because of:
 - a. His presence
 - b. His power
 - c. His pruning

Those are the 3 things that happen, and the reason we don’t have to be afraid is number 1, in the midst of your crisis, whatever you are afraid of, maybe it’s anxiety attacks, maybe it’s a fear that your marriage will never get better, maybe it’s a fear about what’s happening with one of your kids, maybe you have cancer. I don’t know what it is, but wherever your crisis is, wherever the darkness of your valley is, here’s the promise: His presence. I will be with you. Hebrews 13 says, I will always be with you and never ever leave you or forsake you. There are 5 negatives in that verse, and it can’t be said any stronger. I don’t know how it works. All I know, is that in the worst and most difficult times when we come to the end of ourselves, God’s presence, this invisible hand, comes to comfort us and give us peace. This is what the apostle Paul experienced in 2 Corinthians 12. It was a tough time for him, his body wasn’t working, there was a physical affliction, and this guy has a vibrant prayer life. He said, God, I have a major problem here. He says, please take away this affliction. God said no. His answer is that you need this adversity in your life because of my plan and program, and here’s what I’m going to give you. My grace will be sufficient for you. And Paul got it, to the point where he went on to say, that I will most gladly rejoice in my weakness, in distress, in my difficulties, in painful situations because power is perfected in weakness. God promises that if you will come, wherever you are, He will give you just enough grace for this moment. Not enough for tonight, not enough for tomorrow, not enough for next week. He will hold you up right now and give you all that you need.

Notice the next line. It says your rod. You remember what we said the rod was for? It is to kill predators. You have an enemy that swoops in and tries to throw lies at you in the dark times of

your life. He gives you ideas about shortcuts. If this isn't a very good marriage, turn that one in and try another one. You are tired of so and so, blow them off. If you have financial needs, steal. Do it sophisticated and in a Christian way, but steal. Take life into your own hands. Take a shortcut, figure it out. David says when the enemy comes in and tempts you, or condemns you, the shepherd has a rod, and he will crush him. Jot down Ephesians 6:10-18: God says that you have armor, you have weaponry, you have the sword of the spirit, you have prayer. He will protect you with His power. Be strong in the Lord and the strength of His might.

The next thing it talks about is God having a staff. And when you are in this dark valley time, God has a game plan that is bigger than us just getting through it. It is in the darkest times of our lives that God has showed up in the most powerful ways, and do you know what he's done? He's usually pruned me. I have learned more. He's been about changing me. Helping me see things that I would have never seen except for when I was in the valley of the shadow of death. You see, you don't have to fear evil because you know that His presence will be with you, his power will take care of the enemy, and he will use those difficult times as James 1 reminds us, consider it all joy when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let endurance have its perfect result that you may be perfect, or mature, or complete, lacking nothing. He's going to change you. David was a man that knew crisis. He knew about sheep, and he knew about shepherds. And he had confidence in the midst of crisis, and God wants to give you confidence in the midst of your crisis.

The first thing you need to remember, you do not have to be in want because the Great Shepherd will provide all your needs. So, whatever your needs are, run to him.

The second thing is that you don't have to fear. You can be afraid, you can struggle. That's human, but you don't have to be paralyzed by fear. Why? Because the Great Shepherd will protect you.

Now the psalmist does something very interesting. He has given us this image of a sheep and a shepherd, and then he takes that metaphor and gently lays it on the shelf. Then he reaches and grabs another metaphor out of his culture. Because where he is going to end with this Psalm is not going to be down in the doldrums. It's not going to be out of fear. He's going to celebrate understanding who God is, and now the metaphor changes to a banquet. And banquets and feasts and celebrations were filled with music and food and joy and relationships and hugs and kisses and people being together.

3. The last thing that we are going to look at is that the LORD is our Host. Notice now, he says that I will dwell in the house of the Lord. That is his third confident affirmation, and here's why. Because the Shepherd promises an abundant life now and forever. Abundant life, doesn't that ring a bell? Anybody remember what Jesus said in John 10:10? I've come that you might have life and have it abundantly. The word literally means spilling over, overflowing, it doesn't mean that you will drive fancy cars, have big houses, or that you will never have any problems in this life. It means that you are going to overflow from the inside out of the overflow from your resources in Christ. It means that no matter what you go through, it can be rich. It can be deep,

and it can be powerful. It can be all those things regardless of whether you have this income or that income, whether you are healthy as a horse or whether you have cancer. That's what it means to have an abundant life. It means being deeply connected with God in a way that means circumstances do not have the power to dominate your life. You are defined by your relationship with God. There are 3 more pictures that he is going to give us here. (Word pictures for dwelling in the house of the Lord forever.) There are 3 things that it means for us when we are dwelling in the house of the Lord.

- a. The first word picture shows us that God wants to give us peace. It says that You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. This is a great picture. In the ancient near eastern culture, eating a meal was more than going to McDonald's. It was a fellowship, it was a big celebration. When they would have a great military victory, the general that won the victory would come in on a big white horse, and he would come in with his troops and the plunder and all the captives, and then they would have this great celebration thanking God for the victory. Then they would have this feast, a buffet, an eat all you want kind of thing. You would notice that all the way around the outskirts of the room they would have seated the captives. They sat them there so that their defeated enemies would have to watch them eat and watch them enjoy the splendor of victory. It was meant as a way to utterly humiliate them and to let them know our God, the God of victory was greater than their god.

The battles in the Old Testament were conflicts of nations, and at the heart of most of the battles was a conflict that had to do with opposing deities. Is our Jehovah God really the one true God or is Molech or is it Baal? David says, a banquet in the midst of his enemies, deliverance. What God promises in your life is a banquet, where he wants to give you victory of your number one enemy, which is not taxes, not cancer, not a relationship that is not quite as fulfilling, not a wayward child, your number one enemy is sin. You are a slave to whatever you obey, and if left to yourself you are a slave to sin. You are slave to want to do this but find yourself doing that. You are a slave to knowing what it looks like to be a good dad, a good mom, a good person and finding yourself constantly doing the opposite. And this says that what God wants to do first is give you peace. The abundant life is characterized by peace. You know how you get peace? Salvation. Deliverance from your enemy. Romans 5:1 says therefore having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. If you are here today and you have never experienced the saving Grace and the forgiveness of sins washed away and the power of sin broken in your life where you have a new master Christ, and the power to say no to sin and yes to righteousness, and you want the peace that comes, then come to the shepherd. That's the first thing that He wants to give you.

- b. The second thing he wants to give us in this abundant life is more than peace. It's joy. Notice he says in the next line, it says you anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. If you were the host, you have this huge banquet and it's this victory banquet. As every guest would come in they would take olive oil and mix it with some herbs and spices, and as an honor, they would wash their feet and would want them to know this is a

celebration, you are special. The idea of the cup overflowing is just a little picture of hey, we are not giving out goodness in eye droppers here. It is not a watch how much you eat type celebration, it is there is the table, it is filled, it is for you, it is lavish type celebration. It is a picture of God's goodness. He wants to do good things for us spiritually and in every other way. He says enter in. Let me give you victory over your enemies. I will give you peace and then let me give you joy. And joy comes from fellowship with God. In Revelation 3:20 it says, Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door of their hearts, I will come into them and will eat with them and they with me. Eating in the Bible is always a picture of unity, fellowship, communion, relationship. The byproduct of all of those things is joy.

The banquet that God invites you to is not just one where there is deliverance and joy but there is more. It says that goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. The word follow means to pursue. Most of us are so consumed by what may or may not happen in our lives, what happens in the marketplace, what happens in our jobs, wonder how my kids are going to turn out? All of that is just anxiety and fear. You know what that belief system is? It's a commitment to that fact that according to CNN, Fox News, ABC, CBS that the world is a bad, bad place and it happens to everyone all of the time. Instead of the truth that the world is a fallen place sovereignly run by a good God that wants to give you goodness (which in the original language is an interesting word that means lavish love) and hessed, mercy. Steadfast, loyal, covenant commitment to you. And it doesn't follow behind you, it's pursuing. How long? All the days of your life. The Shepherd says come. I will give you peace and forgiveness for your sins. I will give you joy and fellowship with me.

- c. I will give you hope. You can get up knowing every single day that God's plan for your life is good. His goodness and his love are like guardrails on your life and everything that comes in, even in a fallen world, even from the enemy, even in your own flesh, he is going to orchestrate in a way to bring about the highest and best good for you. Is this an offer that you can't refuse or what?

(For the PowerPoint, add a complete outline recap at this point)

Action Step

How can you experience God's peace and power in your situation today? I hope most of you have come through this lesson and can rejoice that God is your good shepherd. But what if you are here, and you have asked Him to be your Savior, it may have been months or even years ago and you feel distant and are thinking, can I really get in on this? Yes, that's why God brought you here today so you can get in on this. He wants you to come back into the fold, so he can love you, provide for you, protect you and give you his promise. There may be others of you that say, well I'm not in the family. I don't know what you are talking about. I can't imagine people standing up and saying that God is with me. I can't imagine people saying that I don't know whether I'm going to live or die, I don't know what the treatments are, but I'm not afraid, and I have peace. And if there is anything in your world that says, you know what, I'd like to know that God, you need to act on that and receive Jesus as your Savior. Here is what we need to understand.

1. We are all sheep. God is not picking on any of us or trying to single you out. Isaiah 53 says that we all like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to our own way, but the Lord has laid upon Him, the messiah Jesus the iniquities of us all. We are all sheep, but Jesus has paid the price.
2. Every sheep needs a shepherd. Sheep that don't have a shepherd get in trouble and die.
3. Jesus wants to be your shepherd today. If you are not as close as you need to be, he'd like to take that staff and pull you in close. And if you are not on the team or in the family, he wants you to pray and turn from your sin. Listen to what Jesus said, he said, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest, spiritually, physically, psychologically. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. Do life my way and you don't have to be afraid because I am gentle and humble of heart. I'm not pushy. And you will find rest for your souls because my yoke is easy, I will carry it for you, and my burden is light.

Is He your Shepherd today? If not, please come.