

The Lord Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23

John Breon

The twenty-third psalm is likely the most famous and popular psalm. And, it's possibly the best-known passage in the whole Bible. It's familiar because we hear it so often in so many settings. It's standard in the Service of Death and Resurrection in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, so I read it at nearly every funeral I conduct. At Ron Menzel's service, Ross Kirven led us in reading it together and it was the basis of my message that day. Many other churches use it in their services as well. Movies and TV shows often quote Psalm 23, especially when they show characters dealing with trouble or grief. It's printed on cards and plaques and posters. It's been set to music many times.

Why do we love this psalm so much? Partly because the twenty-third psalm speaks so personally about God and what God does for people. Not only does it speak *about* God, but it also speaks *to* God in a very personal and direct way. Also, it's brief and easy to remember. So it's become a favorite of many people.

Beth Harper had given Linda a list of scriptures that were particularly meaningful to her. Psalm 23 was included. As I'm working through the psalms this summer, I had planned to use the twenty-third today. And that worked out as Linda had asked to use some of Beth's favorite music and Scripture passages in today's service.

Because Psalm 23 is so familiar and well-loved, we may not think about it clearly. We may assume we know what it means, but we don't give it a lot of thought. It's appropriate that we use it at funerals, with its talk of walking through the "valley of the shadow of death" without fearing evil and living in God's house forever (at least in the King James Version). But if we see it as only for funerals, we're missing a lot of what it says to us and how it helps us pray. The twenty-third psalm is not primarily for funerals but for everyday life (James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* 90).

Lloyd Ogilvie suggests using Psalm 23 for "A Seven-Day Experiment in Trust." That experiment is on the bookmarks we've handed out today.

Each day read all of Psalm 23. Then memorize the verse for the day, along with what he calls the "confidence conditioner." Those are affirmations of what each part of the psalm assures us. By the end of the week, you'll have memorized the whole psalm and expressed your confidence in the Lord in specific ways. You may want to repeat Psalm 23 for another week or more. And you may want to apply this technique to other sections of the Bible. (See *Falling Into Greatness* 49-50.)

Now let's walk through the twenty-third psalm and see what it tells us about the Lord and about us.

Psalm 23 shows us that the Lord provides for us, guides us, protects us, and gives us a permanent place in his presence.

The psalm opens and closes with God's covenant name, *YHWH*, the LORD. These references to the Lord envelop the message and show us who we're talking about and talking to in the psalm. This is not just any god or anyone or anything we make up. This is the God who makes himself known, who reveals his name and shows his mighty power in acts of deliverance and salvation. This is the creator God, the one true God, who makes himself known fully and decisively in Jesus.

Jesus drew on this psalm in some of his statements that reveal who he is. In John's Gospel, there are seven major "I am" statements by Jesus. The phrase "I am" that he uses echoes and embodies what God said to Moses at the burning bush: "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). And the phrase "I Am" is very closely related to God's name that he declares to Moses: *YHWH*, the LORD. In John 10, Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep." He goes on to say, "I am the good shepherd," who lays down his life for the sheep, and, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10:7, 11, 14).

We can say with the psalm, "The Lord is *my* shepherd." What a bold claim to say that the Lord God, who creates and redeems and sustains, is my shepherd, is close to me and cares for me. But that's what the psalm teaches us and that's reality.

In the ancient world, kings were known as shepherds of their people. So to say, "The LORD is my shepherd" is to declare our loyalty to God and our commitment to live under God's reign. And, God does for his people

what a shepherd is supposed to do. God provides life and security. So we can say, with God as our shepherd, "I shall not want." I lack nothing. I have everything I need.

The green pastures, still waters, and right paths were necessities for the sheep. Green pastures had the good grass they needed to eat. Still waters gave them drink and were safe—if the sheep fell in they wouldn't be carried downstream like in a rushing river. The shepherd knew how to locate these places and lead the sheep to them.

God knows how to lead us and provide for us. He gives us what sustains and nourishes us. To say, "he restores my soul," means he keeps me alive. God refreshes our lives and keeps providing all that we need to sustain us. Every moment, we depend on God for life—not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well.

The author Frederick Buechner describes a shepherd he knew. The man watched over his sheep and would carry bales of hay to them through the snow. Buechner says he stood with the shepherd in the sheep shed with a forty watt bulb hanging from the low ceiling

to light up their timid, greedy, foolish, half holy faces as they pushed and butted each other to get at it because if God is like a shepherd, there are more than just a few ways ... that people like you and me are like sheep. Being timid, greedy, foolish, and half holy is only part of it.

...Our *souls* get hungry and thirsty; in fact it is often that sense of inner emptiness that makes us know we have souls in the first place.

Nothing the world gives, nothing we can give each other, can quite fill our hungry and thirsty souls. But sometimes that inner emptiness gets filled. Part of what it means to say that God is like a shepherd is that God feeds that part of us that is hungriest and most in need of feeding (*Listening to Your Life* 178-79).

God provides for us. God also guides us. "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." The shepherd knew how to find the paths that would

take the sheep where they needed to be. The shepherd leads and the sheep follow.

God leads and guides us in the right paths or in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. As we walk with God, follow God's ways, live in right relationship with God and each other, we bring honor to God's name. Name also represents character. So walking in right paths for the sake of God's name is walking the way that's consistent with God's character of faithful love.

The paths of righteousness can even take us through *the darkest valley*. That translation shows us that God is with us and we need not fear evil no matter what dark places we're in. The traditional translation, "valley of the shadow of death," is also still appropriate. There are real threats here: darkness, death, evil. But when we know the Lord as our shepherd, we don't have to fear because God is with us, still protecting and guiding.

Notice the turn here to speaking directly to God, not just about God. We can pray, we can talk to the Lord who is always with us. We can talk to God about the darkness and the fears we face. We can reaffirm our trust in the Lord's presence, protection, and provision. And God welcomes us, helps us, brings us in with the rest of the flock. We find God providing for us even in the midst of danger, among enemies.

I heard a story one time about a man who was a medic during the Viet Nam war. The company he was part of was on a long march. They had gone a long way and he was nearly exhausted. His feet hurt, he ached all over. They came down a hill into a valley with a stream running through it. As he walked through the stream, the cool water soothed his feet. He decided to sit in the stream and rest and let the water wash over his aches. It seemed good for a time. But then the sun began to go down. It was getting dark and a chill came over him. The beautiful scenery around him started to look foreboding—the enemy could be hiding there. He started to get scared. That's a picture of the dark valley, the valley of the shadow. Finally, he dragged himself out of the water and up the hill where the rest of the company was making camp. As he reached his buddies, they started to greet him: "Hey, doc, good to see you. Hey, doc, I knew you'd make it.

Come over here. Have some food.” He was in the company of people who cared about him (I heard this on a Mike Warnke tape many years ago).

The difference between that story and the psalm is that in the dark valley we know God’s presence. God acts as our shepherd even there. The shepherd’s rod was a club to fight off predators. It might also represent the king’s scepter—a reminder that our Lord rules. The shepherd’s staff was to guide and direct the sheep. The crook could also be used to pull sheep up from places they couldn’t get out of themselves. In the dark valleys, and even through the darkest valley of death, our Lord protects us and guides us.

Does God’s protection mean nothing bad ever happens to us? Well, no, not in this life. Bad things do happen. We do suffer. But God never leaves us. And God can take all that happens and work with it for our good. When we’re walking with the Lord, the bad things that happen can’t harm us forever.

Songwriter Mark Heard expressed this well years ago:

When it's dark outside you've got to carry a light
Or you'll stumble and fall like tumbling dice
It takes a steady step, it takes God-given sight
Just to tell what is the truth, what is wrong, what is right

In this world
Thunder throbs in the darkness
Out in the eye of the storm
The friends of God suffer no permanent harm

When the night sky glows with the red fires of war
And the threat of annihilation pounds at your door
You don't have to pretend that you got nerves of steel
To believe that the love of the Lord is actual and real

In this world
Thunder throbs in the darkness

Out in the eye of the storm
The friends of God suffer no permanent harm
When the daybreak comes with a trumpet blast
And the true fruit of faith is tasted at long-last
When the darkness dies and death is undone
And teardrops are dried in the noonday sun

In this world
Thunder throbs in the darkness
Out in the eye of the storm
The friends of God suffer no permanent harm

(This song is by Mark Heard and appears on the album *Eye Of The Storm* [1983] and on the compilation album *Reflections Of A Former Life* [1993].

http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Mark_Heard:Eye_Of_The_Storm)

The prayer continues: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows." Some see the image here changing from shepherd to gracious host. Either way, God provides food, drink, and shelter or protection. And God does that even in the midst of danger, with enemies surrounding.

Anointing a guest with oil was a sign of hospitality. In other settings, kings and priests were anointed to show that they were set apart for service. A shepherd might anoint the sheep with oil to help heal wounds.

God's provision for us includes welcoming us and setting us apart as belonging to him. It also includes healing our wounds, whether they're physical or emotional or spiritual. Another psalm that we'll look at in a few weeks declares that God "forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases" (103:3). Healing comes in many ways.

Jim Buskirk, preaching on Psalm 103, says that there may be a point of healing; usually there's a process of healing; ultimately there's the promise of healing. He tells about when he was going blind as a young man. A woman in his church was praying for him and said, "Lord, we thank you that you always heal your own." He thought, "That's not true. I've

known good people who weren't healed." But she went on, "Lord, we thank you that you always heal your own—sometimes now and sometimes in the resurrection. We're not telling you what to do or how to do it. I just ask you to help Brother Jimmy trust your fantastic love and receive the healing already in progress" (Dr. Buskirk has told this story in many settings. It's on recordings from First UMC, Tulsa and probably at Oral Roberts University, among others).

The Good Shepherd knows how and when to heal us. We can trust him.

Thinking about God guiding us in right paths for his name's sake reminds us of God's character. The psalm's last verse also reflects on God's character: "Surely your goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life." God's very character is to provide for God's people. God is good. When Moses wanted to see the glory of God, God said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you" (Exodus 33:19). God is merciful/faithful/loving. Those are all ways we try to translate the Hebrew word *hesed* that's used here. It's covenant love and faithfulness. In God's revelation to Moses, he declares, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Ex 34:6-7a).

This goodness and loving faithful mercy of the Lord follow us. The word there is really *pursue*. God keeps after us. He leads us if we'll follow. He also chases after us in goodness and love.

Linda visited Beth frequently as she reached the end of her life. In those days Beth slept longer and more deeply. But one day she was able to talk to Linda. Linda said, "I love you." Beth told her, "You are loved more than you'll ever know." Those were the last words she said to her. What a legacy.

Ogilvie tells about a blind shepherd who knew all his sheep by the touch of his hand. Can you feel the Lord's hand upon your face, knowing you as unique and special, giving you his loving care? (*Falling into Greatness* 57). Can you see the Good Shepherd, laying down his life for us, saying, "You're loved more than you know"?

The psalm's final line expresses commitment and confidence. "I will dwell in the house of the LORD for length of days." Originally it was a commitment to be in the temple, in God's presence. Every day of our life God is with us, guiding us, providing for us, pursuing us. If we will, we can live all of life in God's presence.

At some time, the last word here got translated as "forever." This relationship of knowing the Lord as shepherd doesn't end with physical death. It carries us into eternity. So it's right to use this psalm at funerals. These are words of trust in the face of the final enemy, death (1 Corinthians 15:26).

We hear an echo of the psalm in Jesus' words on the night before his death: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:1-2). In biblical times, a father's house would have been a compound where an extended family lived in several tents or houses. That's the picture behind what Jesus says. There's plenty of room with the Father for all who will come, who will trust him to be their Shepherd and King.

We find another echo, maybe the fulfillment, of this psalm in Revelation:

They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (7:15-17)

If we'll follow this shepherd along the right paths that's where he'll take us. And he will guide us, provide for us, and protect us all along the way to our permanent home in his presence.