

Life Without Lack: Living in God's Abundance

The LORD Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23:1

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. 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.

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 isn't primarily for funerals but for everyday life (James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* 90).

For the next few weeks, let's live in the twenty-third psalm. We'll see what it tells us about the Lord and about us. As we live with Psalm 23, it will begin to live in us—it'll become part of our thinking and praying and living. We want to do more than know this psalm. We want to know the Lord who is the shepherd.

This psalm contains a narrative about the exceedingly generous God. By letting the images wash over your mind, you imbed this true

narrative into your soul. Your mind and your body will begin to be shaped by these words. As you begin you will probably have to refocus your attention, but it soon turns into a prayer experience. (James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* 91)

In the ancient world, kings were known as shepherds of their people. The LORD is often called the Shepherd of Israel. 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.

A writer named Kenneth Bailey lived and taught for forty years in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cyprus. He experienced firsthand the land and the shepherds with their sheep in the region where David and other biblical writers lived. He describes the open pastureland of Samaria and Judea. One you get past the shelter and protection of the villages along the ridge, you're on your own.

In those open trackless spaces the traveler and his companions are alone. Thieves, wild animals, snakes, sudden blinding dust storms, water shortages, loose rocks and furnace-like heat are all potential threats to any traveler. (Kenneth Bailey, *The Good Shepherd* 37)

That's the kind of country David and other shepherds in ancient Israel would have experienced. The opening verse of Psalm 23 is a commitment to the Lord as the source of security among many dangers where no other help is available.

The sheep confidently follow the shepherd. They know that with him all will be well. Bailey also points out that no sheep is ever taken out to the pasture alone. Any time there's mention of sheep, we can assume that it's talking about a flock. But this famous psalm focuses on the individual as David describes his own spiritual journey (Bailey 38). And, we remember Jesus' famous story about the shepherd who goes to look for the one lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7).

A shepherd is one who cares for the sheep, who provides for them, guides them, protects them.

This picture of the shepherd and the sheep is a picture of life, of our life in this world, of our life with God. Who is our Shepherd and what is he like? When we say with David, "The LORD is my shepherd," what do we mean? Who is the LORD and what kind of shepherd is he for us?

The LORD is God. God is the one who cares for us, who provides for us, guides us, and protects us. That's a good thing. The Lord God we see in Scripture is the kind of shepherd we need. I say that because we believe two main things about God: *God is great and God is good*. Do you ever pray that little mealtime prayer? "God is great, God is good; let us thank him for our food." We have a *Little Golden Book About God* that one of our children received as a present. Now we read it to Charlie. The main things it says are that God is great, God is good, and God is love.

Let's think about what it means to say that God is great and God is good—and what that says about God as our shepherd. If our thoughts about God can line up better with who God really is, we can see why life with God is life without lack and we can trust God more and experience him in deeper ways (see Dallas Willard, *Life Without Lack: Living in the Fullness of Psalm 23*). Along the way, we'll see some of the names of God in the Bible and what they tell us about who God is, what God is like, and what God does.

God is great.

We see that the Lord God, our shepherd, is the **God of creation**. "In the beginning God created...." God said, "Let there be...and there was" (Genesis 1). Scripture affirms everywhere that the Lord is the maker of heaven and earth. God created the world, the universe, that we can see. As we look into space, we see billions of stars in a galaxy and billions of galaxies. Our planet orbits around a star that's ninety-three million miles away. The next nearest star is 4.25 light years away (about 5.8 trillion miles). When we say, "Lord God of the universe," that's a mouthful. Our brains can barely begin to comprehend those kinds of distances.

We can handle a little better thinking about our own planet, where we live. Still, the world seems so big and there's so much diversity and wonder here, we are amazed at the greatness of our Creator. And we haven't even talked about the unseen world that God created and dwells in.

Not only is the Lord the God of creation, but God is also present and involved in the life of people in this world. One of the great examples of this in the Old Testament is when God delivered his people Israel from slavery in Egypt, led them out and brought them to a land he had promised their ancestors. The Lord our shepherd is the **God of exodus**. That whole act of delivering and redeeming Israel was called the exodus, the "way out." The Lord showed that he is greater than all the gods of Egypt. He opened the way for his people to go through the sea. He guided them through the wilderness, provided for them, and defeated their enemies.

Some of the names for God that are in the Bible help us see more of God's greatness. Now, I'm not a Hebrew scholar—I'm not even a Hebrew student—so I'm relying on those who are for this information.

El is the general name for God in Hebrew and related languages. Israel adapted that name and it shows strength, power, and majesty. There are several OT names for God that combine *El* with other words.

***El Roi*—"the God who sees" (Gen 16:7-14).** Hagar. God sees the outcast. God sees those in need. God sees you and me.

***El Shaddai*—"God Almighty" (Gen 17:1).** The LORD speaking to Abram

***El Elyon*—"God Most High" (Gen 14:7-24).** Melchizedek and Abram

***El Olam*—"the Everlasting God" (Gen 21:33).** Abraham marked a treaty by planting a tree and calling on the name of the LORD

Elohim is a plural noun that's regularly used with a singular verb. This name is used often in the OT. The true God has all the powers and attributes people thought false gods had. The Lord God eclipses those deities that don't even exist (Larry Hart, *Truth Aflame* 63).

So the God who makes himself known in Israel's history and in the Bible is truly great.

God is good.

God is not just sheer power and greatness. God shows us that his nature, his character is good in a way that we understand goodness. The Lord our shepherd is the **God of covenant love and faithfulness**.

There's a phrase that shows up often in the Bible. It's almost Israel's motto. It says, "The LORD is good; his love endures forever" (2 Chronicles 7:3). "For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations" (Psalm 100:5). Love and faithfulness appear together numerous times in the psalms.

We are invited to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps 34:8).

Psalm 23 opens and closes with God's covenant name, **YHWH**. It's pronounced **Yahweh** and it's translated **the LORD**. These references to the Lord envelop the psalm's message and show us who we're talking about and talking to in the psalm. This isn't 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 and his goodness in acts of deliverance and salvation.

This name of God, *Yahweh*, means "he who is" or "he who is truly present." At some point in their history, the Jews stopped pronouncing this word and substituted the word *Adonai* for it. That's another word that means Lord.

The name YHWH/Yahweh gets combined with other words to describe God.

Yahweh-Jireh—"the LORD will provide" (Gen 22:14). Abraham and Isaac. God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac. Centuries later, on that same mountain, God's Son Jesus died as the substitute for everyone. So God provided salvation for us.

Yahweh-Rapha—"the LORD who heals" (Ex 15:26). after escape from Egypt—in the wilderness—call to listen to God and do his will

Yahweh-Shalom—"the LORD is peace" (Judges 6:24). Gideon

Yahweh-Tsidkenu—"the LORD is our righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:6) prophecy of Messiah (Hart 64).

This is the creator God, the one true God, who makes himself known fully and decisively in Jesus.

Jesus drew on Psalm 23 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. Living in that kind of relationship with the Lord God means that we lack nothing. We have everything we need. As we continue exploring this psalm, we'll see how that works, how God provides all that we need.

Today, we're invited to put our trust in the Lord God, the good shepherd, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus himself offers to be our shepherd. He shows us the greatness and the goodness and the love of God. He keeps coming to us in the Holy Spirit to care for us, to provide all that we need, to guide us, to protect us. Will we entrust ourselves to him and commit ourselves to following him? Where do you need God to show that he is great and good in your life? He's present here and now. He's available for you to turn to him and ask him for what you need.