

Shepherd Psalms

Psalm 23
July 28, 2019



Please read Psalm 23 before going any further in this transcript.

For many of us, it's probably almost impossible, to hear the words of Psalm 23 and not to think of a funeral or a graveside service. This beautiful psalm has offered so much comfort and consolation to us as we've heard it read in the context of saying goodbye to a loved one. And that makes Psalm 23 a particular blessing to many of us. However, when David first penned these words, it's unlikely that he had any idea how God would use Psalm 23 in the future. It's doubtful that he wrote these words in an effort to comfort the many millions of people who would come well after his own lifetime. David wrote these words out of his own personal experience. Not just out of his experience of being a SHEPHERD himself or of being the Shepherd-King of Israel. David wrote these words out of his experience of being a SHEEP; a follower of the LORD. So, today, as we prepare to dig into Psalm 23, let's try to avoid something that likely comes naturally to us: let's AVOID thinking of these words as mostly applicable to the END of our lives. Let's consider these words as more broadly applicable to ALL of the days of our lives.¹

It can feel a little strange to closely examine a psalm like Psalm 23. It is so familiar to us in its overall beauty and poetry, that it can feel almost irreverent to break it into pieces and put it under a microscope. Sometimes the best way to really think about a familiar Scripture is to slow ourselves down, to think it over, verse by verse and thought by thought.² Psalm 23:1 begins, "The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing." Let's not miss the significance of the capitalization in v. 1. All 4 letters are capitalized in the LORD's name: L O R D. This clues us in to something that we find in the original Hebrew. LORD is the name, Yahweh (sometimes we say Jehovah). Yahweh is God's special name, His relational, covenant name. David's use of the word "my" gives a very personal and individual feel to this psalm. Some of the other psalms we read have a more corporate dimension to them, but not Psalm 23. So, David teaches us some things that he has personally learned about following the LORD. **First of all, following the LORD means...**

1. Choosing the right shepherd. This idea of the LORD as our shepherd is very common throughout the Bible. We see it throughout the Psalms but also throughout the entire Old Testament and the New Testament as well.³ In fact, in the New Testament, Jesus described the crowds as being like sheep without a shepherd.⁴ Some of us here this morning, lack a shepherd in our lives. We are bouncing around from one thing to the next, with no clear direction and no good leadership in our lives.

Or, perhaps it's not so much that we lack a shepherd but that we have chosen the wrong shepherd. Perhaps we have chosen to be shepherded by what is popular today. By the teachings of this world that tickle our ears. By what is politically acceptable or financially most profitable. By self-help religion or by motivational speakers.⁵ Perhaps it's a mostly good thing, like the outdoors, hunting and fishing, or sports. But sometimes, even good things like these, can become an obsession. To the point where it has led us away from the LORD as our Good Shepherd. Or, maybe we have chosen to be our own shepherd. We've convinced ourselves that we have life all figured out.

¹ Note Psalm 23:6, "...all the days of my life..."

² It might be compared to appreciating the beauty and magnitude of a vast forest by examining the bark and leaves of individual trees. An oak tree vs. a birch tree compared to a pine tree, all tell us something a little different about the forest.

³ We see it throughout the psalms in places like Psalm 100:3, "Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture." We see it throughout the rest of the Old Testament, as early as Genesis 48:15, "...God who has been my shepherd..." We see it throughout the New Testament, as late as Revelation 7:17, "For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water..." See also Psalm 28:9, 79:13, 80:1, and 95:7 as well as Matthew 2:6, 9:36, 25:32; John 10:11; Hebrews 13:20; and 1 Peter 2:25. See also Genesis 49:24; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10; and Zechariah 9:16.

⁴ See Matthew 9:36.

⁵ Sometimes we follow the shepherding of the thoughts and opinions of others; in fact, we often "follow" them on social media. As a culture, we are becoming confused by the façade of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and the like. They present an alternate reality, where everyone else's life seems so much better and happier than ours.

Perhaps our own self-confidence and our own selfishness have caused us to become arrogant: concluding that we are part of the elite. We're the kind of sheep who doesn't need a shepherd.⁶ Whatever or whoever is shepherding our lives will inform our worldview. Choosing the wrong shepherd will draw us away from the right paths that the LORD desires for us. Choosing the right Shepherd is the 1st and most important thing that we can learn from Psalm 23.⁷ Until we have chosen to follow the Lord, the rest of Psalm 23 does not apply to us.

The next thing that David teaches us is that following the LORD means...

2. Trusting Him through our darkest valleys. Psalm 23:4 begins, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..." There's a reality in verse 4 that can be quite startling at first, but then it becomes comforting. In verse 4, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley," follows right after the thought in verse 3, "He guides me along the right paths." In other words, walking through the darkest valley is often the RIGHT path.⁸ Psalm 23 is not teaching us that if we would just follow the LORD as our Shepherd, THEN we would never encounter any dark valleys. To put it another way, dark times are not necessarily a sign that we've done anything wrong. Dark valleys don't mean that the Lord has let us down or that He is no longer with us. He IS leading us, not AROUND the valley or even AWAY from it, but rather THROUGH it.

David gives us some good reasons to trust the LORD as our Shepherd: First of all...

1) He is WITH us! Through life's highs and lows, through the thick and thin, God is with us. Therefore, along with David, we can say with confidence, "I will fear no evil, for you are WITH me."⁹ My confidence is not in my own arrogant self-reliance. My steady hands and my gaze fixed forward are not a denial of the reality of what I'm going through. My confidence is fueled by my faith, by my trust in God, that He is with me IN this darkest valley. He will lead me through it; I'll come up out of it on the other side. And He'll be standing there, right next to me.

Did you notice the grammar change? We went from 3rd person to 2nd person, from "he" to "you." In verses 1-3 David refers to the Lord as "He." But in verse 4, he switches to "you." The shepherd is no longer way out in front, at a distance, leading the flock. He is now right alongside. He's giving a personal escort; we are well within reach of His rod and staff.¹⁰ Another grammatical thing that isn't quite as obvious in the English text is that the phrase, "you are with me," is placed at "the exact structural center" of Psalm 23.¹¹ This highlights the main message of the psalm: "you are with me."¹² This is David's testimony. The LORD is NEAR to us, like a shepherd who dwells among his sheep.¹²

There is a 2nd reason why we can trust the LORD as our Shepherd:

2) He is strong! Psalm 23:4 goes on, "...your rod and staff, they comfort me."¹³ The staff was for guiding and rounding up the flock, but the rod was for smacking down any attackers. David knew all about these tools of the shepherding trade. In fact, he explains this to King Saul before slaying Goliath. 1 Samuel 17:34-35 says, "But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it." David wasn't talking about his slingshot here. He would have used his shepherd's rod for this. This is close "hand to claw combat." Therefore, he proclaims: "I will fear no evil!" He says this not just because he knows that God is right there with him, but also because he knows that God is packing heat. The LORD has the necessary weapons to defend His sheep and to take out any attackers.

⁶ Sometimes we follow the shepherding of our very own thoughts. We follow the negativity and criticism that is swirling around in our own hearts and minds. These are thoughts that we need to take captive and replace with God's Truth and with His thoughts about us. See 2 Corinthians 10:5.

⁷ By the way, choosing the right Shepherd is an ongoing, lifelong, daily decision that each one of us needs to make for ourselves.

⁸ Kidner, Derek, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 128.

⁹ This idea is closely linked with the words from Psalm 16:8, "I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken."

¹⁰ See Kidner, Derek, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 129.

¹¹ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1005.

¹² It also causes us to anticipate our Good Shepherd Jesus, who is called "Emmanuel" in the NT, which means "God with us." J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms*, Abingdon, Nashville, TN, 1993, pp. 127, 136.

¹³ It is comforting for children who have parents who not only set boundaries but also enforce those boundaries. It gives a very real sense of security.

A shepherd's staff was long and it likely had a hook on one end for grabbing a leg or pulling a sheep out of a thicket. It was used mostly as an "instrument of support" to guide and control the sheep.¹⁴¹⁵ A shepherd's rod was more like a short club or a bat. He used this not only to fight off wild beasts but also as an "instrument of authority."¹⁶ In fact, it's interesting to note that, in the context of a royal ruler, a "rod" was used as a "scepter," "and becomes a visible ornament of kingly authority."¹⁷ Therefore, these 2 instruments illustrate for us that a shepherd not only staunchly protects the sheep, but he also rules over them with authority. This is worth reflecting on. If we only trust the LORD as our protector, we miss a key dimension to our faith. Our Shepherd doesn't just guide, protect, and rescue us; He also disciplines us, keeps us on the right track, and has authority over our very lives.¹⁸ We should trust the LORD through our darkest valleys because He is the leader AND because He is the ruler over our lives. In fact, that's what Lord means.

The final thing that David teaches us in Psalm 23 is that following the LORD means...

3. Rejoicing in His lasting goodness and love. In our modern experience, Psalm 23 isn't usually the 1st place that we turn to for REJOICING. However, the *NIV Study Bible* sheds some light on an interesting perspective. Psalm 23 is "A profession of JOYFUL trust in the Lord as the good Shepherd-King."¹⁹ We certainly think of trust when we read Psalm 23, but we don't normally think of joy. Yet that idea is here as well. In fact, in David's day, the reference in Psalm 23:6 to "the house of the LORD" refers to the Tabernacle. This is the special tent where God's people would gather to celebrate and rejoice in worship.²⁰ It's certainly appropriate for us to read Psalm 23 as a somber reflection of trust. But it is at least equally appropriate, to read it as a JOYFUL declaration of God's lasting goodness and love!²¹ In Psalm 23:5 David joyfully declares, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies! You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows!"

David takes an unexpected turn. He switches from his illustration of a shepherd/sheep to a description of a dinner host/honored guest. Verse 5 may sound a little strange to our contemporary ears. As one person notes, eating a feast in front of my enemy doesn't sound all that appealing; "The food might be good, but my digestion wouldn't be."²² Although this may sound strange to our ears, it made sense in Old Testament times. Verse 5 may be referring to how, back in the day, kings in the Middle East would force their defeated enemies to sit and watch them enjoy a delicious meal.²³ To you and me, this strange-sounding practice comes across as a little cruel. Kind of like rubbing their faces in it. But perhaps it feels less cruel when we consider it in light of the context of the preceding psalm. You see, Psalm 22 and 23 are actually linked together as a subsection with a few other psalms. So, they were often read together.²⁴ Psalm 22 gives us a glimpse of some of David's enemies, who were earlier saying things like this:²⁵ "He trusts in the LORD," they say, "let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him." (Psalm 22:8)²⁶

Therefore, in Psalm 23, the Lord's name and reputation is vindicated as He hosts a meal with David as His guest of honor. Choosing the LORD as his Shepherd, not only leads David to green

¹⁴ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 880.

¹⁵ "the Palestinian shepherd normally carried two implements, a club (or rod) to fend off wild beasts and a crook (or staff) to guide and control the sheep. Peter C. Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 1-50*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1983, p. 207.

¹⁶ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 880.

¹⁷ Gerald H. Wilson, *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms Vol. 1*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 435.

¹⁸ Consider 2 Samuel 5:2 and Hebrews 12:4-11.

¹⁹ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 879.

²⁰ God's house in David's day was the tabernacle. The temple wasn't built until his son Solomon became king. "There were regular religious observances at the tabernacle at Gibeon...as well as at the tent that David built for the ark in Jerusalem." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 982.

²¹ Moreover, the Jewish people likely used Psalm 23 as a key psalm of rejoicing when they would gather for their "festival of praise." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 879.

²² Ben Patterson, *God's Prayer Book*, Tyndale, Carol Stream, IL, 2008, p. 83.

²³ Ben Patterson, *God's Prayer Book*, Tyndale, Carol Stream, IL, 2008, p. 84. However, also consider parallels to the Israelites wandering after their Exodus from Egypt. Psalm 78:19 says God "spread a table in the wilderness" for them. Peter C. Craigie notes this as a plausible connection.

²⁴ Psalm 23 is actually part of a unit of psalms 15-24. Together they form a concentric pattern that centers on Psalm 19. Read more in *The NIV Study Bible* footnotes on pp. 870-871, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

²⁵ Ben Patterson, *God's Prayer Book*, Tyndale, Carol Stream, IL, 2008, p. 84.

²⁶ Psalm 22 is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 878.

pastures, but provides a meal for him, blesses him by anointing his head with oil, and gives him a cup that is not just full, but overflows.²⁷ All of this is proof of the LORD's abundant provision and protective shelter. Yahweh shows His delight in leading David by rescuing him and by delivering him from his enemies. This idea is carried even further in Psalm 23:6, "Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life..." The word "follow" literally means "pursue." Now usually, this particular word is used to indicate a HOSTILE intent. However, David seems to be using a form of wit here. He is driving home the opposite point: Instead of having his enemies pursuing him, David has God's goodness and love pursuing him.²⁸ In other words, there has been a radical shift here. David goes from looking over his shoulder with his enemies in hot pursuit, to having goodness and love chasing after him.²⁹ There is a principle here for us: As we follow God's guidance along the right paths, His goodness and love will follow us - even pursue us!

This leads right into our closing question: "Who are you following in this life?" Or, better put: "Is the LORD your shepherd?" This is an ongoing, daily decision. Earlier, I mentioned that when David wrote the words, "house of the Lord," he was referring to the earthly Tabernacle. However, when he adds on the word, "forever," it broadens our thinking. The earthly Tabernacle did NOT last forever. In fact, it wasn't meant to. Nor was the earthly temple that David's son Solomon would build later. Hebrews 8:5 tells us that this earthly sanctuary is only a "copy and shadow of what is in heaven."³⁰ In other words, things that are built in heaven are designed to last forever.³¹ We can have full confidence in the LORD as our Shepherd who will lead us right into our eternal home.

Verse 6 now brings us full circle, by mentioning the LORD once again in all caps. The "house of the LORD" is Yahweh's house. And the house that lasts forever is the one that Jesus has gone to prepare for us. So, as much as we've tried to look at Psalm 23 from a little different perspective today, we can't help but reflect on Jesus' words in John 14:2-3, "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? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." We can rejoice in the LORD's goodness and love because it will last for us right into eternity!

For many of us, our hearts are drawn to the old hymn, written by Fanny Crosby back in 1875, "All the Way My Savior Leads Me." It's #641 in our church hymnal. Consider these words from the final refrain:

"All the way my Savior leads me; O the fullness of His love!
Perfect rest to me is promised in my Father's house above.
When my spirit, clothed immortal, wings its flight to realms of day,
This my song through endless ages, 'JESUS led me all the way.'"

JESUS is the Good Shepherd. He is willing to lead us. Psalm 23 calls us to choose to follow the LORD!

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²⁷ "my cup overflows" vividly illustrates the earlier point made back in verse 1, "I lack nothing." In fact, this illustrates a picture of even more than is needed.

²⁸ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 880.

²⁹ All the while, back in verse 5, his enemies are seated in front of him watching him enjoy the meal that God has prepared for him. David spends the 1st 5 verses of Psalm 23, declaring how he has been FOLLOWING the Lord's guidance. He now turns around to find that goodness/love are following him, all the days of his life.

³⁰ See also Hebrews 9:11.

³¹ Consider Psalm 84:10.

