

My Shepherd!
Psalm 23

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| <p>1 מְזִמֹּר לְדָוִד יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר׃</p> <p>2 בְּנֵאֲוֹת רִשָּׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מֵי מְנַחֲתוֹת יְנַהֲלֵנִי׃</p> <p>3 נַפְשִׁי יִשְׁוֹבֵב יְנַתְּנֵי בְּמַעְגְּלֵי צְדָק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ׃</p> <p>4 גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ בְּגֵיא צְלֻמֹּת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטְךָ וּמַשְׁעֲנֹתֶיךָ תַּחֲמֵה יְנַחֲמֵנִי׃</p> <p>5 תַּעֲרֶךְ לְפָנַי אֶשְׁלֹחַן נֶגֶד צָרָדִי וְדִשְׁנָתָה בַשֶּׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי כּוֹסִי יִרְוֶה׃</p> <p>6 אֵךְ אֶשׁוּב וְחַסֵּד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל־יְמֵי תַי וְשָׁבְתִי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאָרְךָ יָמַי׃</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">A psalm by David</p> <p>I AM is my shepherd, I do not want.</p> <p>In green pastures he allows me to rest; by choice watering places he leads me.</p> <p>My vitality he restores; he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.</p> <p>Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.</p> <p>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.</p> <p>Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house I AM forever.</p> | <p>I. Shepherd</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a. food and rest</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">b. guidance</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">c. protection</p> <p>II. Host at a table</p> <p>III. Pursuing Protector</p> |
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Psalm 23
4 Strophes — 2 Stanzas
J.P. Fokkelman

A Psalm by David

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|-----|---|--|---|---------------------|
| I | 1 | The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. | } | <i>>Stanza 1</i> |
| | 2 | He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters. | | |
| | 3 | He restores my soul; he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. | | |
| II | 4 | Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. | } | |
| III | 5 | You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. | } | <i>>Stanza 2</i> |
| IV | 6 | Surely goodness and loyal-love will pursue me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. | | |

Psalm 23¹
Bruce K. Waltke

Shepherd

I AM is my shepherd, I do not want.
In green pastures he allows me to rest;
by choice watering places he leads me.
My vitality he restores;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

food and rest

guidance

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, protection
I fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Host at a banqueting table

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Home

Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of I AM
forever.

Psalm 23, the most famous psalm, is a song of trust to the Lord. The psalm consists of **three vignettes** (vv. 1-4, 5, 6).

As in a **drama**, when the curtain lifts the stage is set for **pastoral scenes** and the LORD appears as a **shepherd**. After the curtain is dropped at the end of verse 4, it is lifted again in verse 5; this time and the LORD appears as **host** preparing a banqueting table. Once again the curtain drops and opens in verse 6; this time the psalmist is seen in the LORD's eternal house.

¹ Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship, A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 434-445. Note that Waltke uses "I AM" to translate "LORD," since that is the meaning of the God's personal name (YHWH) given to Moses, which is differentiated from the title Lord, meaning "sovereign." It refers to God's covenant keeping faithfulness to his people.

I. Shepherd vv. 1-4

The metaphors follow the **typical day in the life of a shepherd**.

The psalm begins with the shepherd leading his sheep to green pastures and then allowing them to rest in the grassy pastures by cool and quiet waters. Renewed, the sheep resume their trek back to his sheepfold. The Shepherd leads his sheep from the sheepfold along safe paths to the green pastures and water and then back to the sheepfold. Should the Shepherd and his sheep confront an enemy, the Shepherd is fully armed with club and crook to beat off the enemy. Upon return to the sheepfold the shepherd attends to his fevered or scratched sheep. The poet, however, transforms the healing and protective sheepfold into the imagery of a festive banquet where a rich host lavishly entertains his guest, while adversaries of the sheep-turned-guest look on helplessly.

The bold confession, “**The Lord is my shepherd**” establishes an **intimate** relationship between the Lord and the individual; asserts the individual’s total dependence upon God’s goodness and kindness to care for him; and entails his relationship is based on **loving trust**.

So close is the connection between shepherd and sheep that to this day Middle Eastern shepherds can divide flocks that have mingled at a well or during the night simply by calling their sheep, who follow their shepherd’s voice. Shepherds are inseparable from their flocks. If a sheep becomes lost, the shepherd leaves the others in the open country to find it, and when he finds it he calls his friends to celebrate with him because he found his one lost sheep.²

Verse 1 introduces the pastoral setting imagery and the psalm’s thesis: Because the Lord is my shepherd, “I shall not want.” The imagery is then elaborated: As the shepherd provides **food and rest (v. 2), guidance (v. 3) and protection (v. 4)**.

² *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, general editors: Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit; Tremper Longman III (Downers Gove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1998), 782.

1. Provides food and rest v. 2

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.

The pastoral imagery begins with the shepherd's task to lead sheep from the nighttime protection in a sheepfold to places of grazing *in green pastures*. And so the good Shepherd *allows me to rest*. The greenness of vegetation is an aesthetic delight as well as a functional perquisite to life. The plural suggests the Shepherd never runs out of finding green pastures for his sheep. After the morning grazing and watering, sheep typically lie down for several hours at midday in a shady or cool place (Song 1:7). And so the good Shepherd *allows me to rest*, a situation that assumes the sheep is sated. Driven hard for one day a sheep dies (Gen 33:13).

The parallel re-enforces and expands the first verset. The shepherd's solicitous care to lead his sheep to grassy pastures is his tender care to lead them to waters in a choice resting place.

2. Provides guidance v. 3

He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

My vitality he restores functions as a transition between the themes of rest with ample provisions and guidance.

By providing his sheep with rich provisions of food and cool drink the good Shepherd revives the psalmist's spirit, life and vitality to continue the trek home.

"Leads me" means leading one safely through snares and triumphantly to a desired and promised destiny.

In paths refers to "cart tracks," "wagon ruts." While the earth is soft, wagon wheels press the trails that others are obliged to follow after it dries and hardens.

Of righteousness values the divine and human modes of behavior as doing what is communally faithful and beneficial.

The good Shepherd does this *for the sake of his name*. . . *I AM's* fame rests "on faithfulness in keeping covenants (Ps 138:2) and power demonstrated on behalf of the nation (2 Sam 7:23; Neh 9:10; Jer 16:21).

3. Provides protection v. 4

Even though I walk through the valley deep darkness,
I fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

It was the task of a shepherd to lead sheep on a safe path both to and from the sheepfold. Nevertheless, *even* supposing that should the situation arise and the saint says that *I walk in in a ravine of deep darkness* he or she feels safe. Though the etymology is “valley of death” it may be misleading. In its other seventeen uses, all poetic, “it refers to literal darkness in opposition to light, usually with an implied sorrow or fear.” The phrase connotes terror (Job 24:17, twice), deep gloom (Ps. 107:10, 14), deep distress (Isa. 9:2; Ps. 44:19) and extreme danger (Ps 23:4; Jer 2:6).

His Shepherd is fully armed to beat off an attack by anything or anyone. The mention of both the rod and staff suggests the shepherd is fully equipped. The angel of the Lord had a rod in his hand (Judg 6:21) and nobles are depicted as having scepters and staffs (Nu. 21:18). Staffs were used by the blind (Exod 21:19) and the aged (Zech 8:4), and are used figuratively to depict trusting in something (2 Kgs 18:21; Isa 36:6). Here the literal and figurative uses combine. We should probably think of the shepherd’s crook, which was used to rescue sheep caught on a ledge or ravine.

II. Host v. 5

The second vignette transforms the returned-to-sheepfold into a **festive table**, heightening the notions of provision, restoration and protection.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

The dramatic playwright and poet replaces the staging of a returned-to-sheepfold with festivities at a banquet table. Center stage is the Host and his welcome guest. The playwright leaves it to his audience to fill in the kind of housing, albeit the movement from the shepherd’s life suggests a royal tent. The poem continues in direct address from the trusting covenant partner to his God. Once again the catalogue of *I AM*’s provisions is marvelously inclusive and fashioned with attention to the telling

detail. The guest praises his Host: *You prepare before me a table*, a metonymy for the bowls and goblets laden with rich food and exquisite elixirs.

The verbal placing together of “you prepare” and “before me” suggests the intimacy of the Host and guest. The theme of provision and rest is conjoined with protection by adding that the feast takes place *in the sight of my enemies* (see Ps 8:3) who look on helplessly. So mighty is his Host that the beneficiary conspicuously enjoys a royal banquet right in front of his adversaries who cannot touch him.

You anoint means literally “make fat,” *with oil*. Unlike the traditional term “to anoint” (Ps 2:2), which signifies being consecrated to an office. The *piel* form of the verb signifies the pouring of olive oil on the guest’s head, connoting the wealth, generosity and care of the host to promote the renewal, joy and healing of his weary and wounded guest: “In a climate where dry skin was a problem, especially for travelers, anointing with oil was a refreshment (Ps 23:5), which at a literal level, however, refers to healing oil applied to an injured sheep in the sheepfold at the end of the day.”³

My cup is a shelled shaped goblet presumably filled with wine. *Runs over* glosses literally “is superfluity [of drink].” “*My goblet is superfluity*” means it is brim-full. The goblet functions as a synecdoche for all the dishes on the table that are filled to overflowing with prepared meats, cereals and vegetables.

Better than being likened to a sheep under the care of a shepherd is that of being likened to a guest with a wealthy host in a royal tent who provides a table so abundantly laden with food and drink that the cup brims over; the host refreshes and heals his guest with oil on his head, and all of this as he protects his guest while enemies look on helplessly.

III. Home v. 6

**Surely goodness and everlasting-love shall pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of I AM
forever**

The poet leaves the realm of the imaginary and returns to the real world, a world as good as and even better than imagined. The sheepfold and banqueting table are transmuted into the house of God. The loving attention to details is now abstracted into God’s two benevolent, “goodness and kindness.”

³ *Biblical Imagery of the Bible*, p. 603.

The exclamatory conjunction *surely* ('*ak*) gives vent to the psalmist's expression of a truth newly perceived. In this poem of trust celebrating *I AM*, *goodness and everlasting-love* (*hesed*) are personified metonymies of God's benevolent attributes. When Moses requests to see the glory of God, God replies, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you (Exod 33:19-20). In a subsequent event of that encounter

"*I AM* passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, '*I Am, I Am*, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love (*hesed*) and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exod. 34:6-7).

Hesed essentially means "help to the needy" and has no precise English equivalent. It refers to a situation where a needy partner depends on another for deliverance, and the deliverer does so freely out of all his finer spiritual and sensitive instincts (i.e., kindness, mercy, love, and loyalty). K. D. Sakenfeld defined it as "deliverance or protection as a responsible keeping of faith with another with whom one is in a relationship."⁴

I AM's benevolences *will pursue me* (cf. Hos 2:7) as in a chase or hunt so as not to allow the beneficiary to escape. *I AM* has an unfailing desire and commitment to do him good. The adverbial phrase adds that the chase will last *all the days of my life* or "as long as I live," (cf. Gen 3:17; Deut 17:19; Josh 1:5).

As commented above, after leaving the sheepfold in the morning and being guided safely to grazing and watering, the sheep return to the sheepfold where they are healed and tended to. So also in the climatic conclusion, personified goodness and loving kindness are represented as diligently following their cherished object all the days of his life (v. 6A), and then the mortal returns safely to his true home, *the house of I AM*. For David God's house referred to the tent he pitched for the ark (2 Sam 6:17). After his death the reference became Solomon's temple and in the canon that includes the New Testament it refers to the resurrected body of Christ and life in him (John 1:14; 2:12-23; 1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:14-20; 1 Pet 2:4-10).

Better than being a sheep under the care of a shepherd and even better than being a guest wined and dined in by a sheik is the reality of being forever in the Lord's

⁴ K. D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible* [Harvard Semitic Museum 17; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1978), 233.

house. The final vignette abstracts God's attributes conveyed by the two images: his goodness and *unfailing love*, and transforms the table into God's house.

Conclusion

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ as son of David according to the flesh experiences the shepherding care of his Father in heaven, and as Son of God becomes the good shepherd providing, restoring, guiding and protecting his sheep, namely, the individual believer within the corporate body of his Flock, the Church (Lk 10:3; Jn 10:1-16). "They are not to fear . . . the danger of deceptive attacks from within and overt attacks from without (Matt 7:15; 10:16) and the certainty of undergoing great tribulation in the future (Mark 14:27) because it is God who is giving [them] the kingdom (Luke 12:32)." Ezekiel predicted Messiah's role as shepherd (Ezek 38:24), and so did Micah (Mic 5:2, 4, fulfilled in Matt 2:6).

Moreover, in the New Testament Christ appoints Peter to shepherd his flock after his ascension (John 21:15-17) the apostles use the shepherd metaphor to delineate how pastors and elders should fill their gift and office (Acts 20:28-29; 1 Pet 5:3-4).⁵

⁵*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 783.

Broken Things⁶
Karen Dabaghian
(Psalm 23)

LORD, all I have to offer are broken things
shabby, tattered things,
things that should be thrown out
with the trash.

LORD, all I have to offer sifts
through my fingers like sand
an hourglass heap blown away
by the wind.

LORD, I offer my broken things,
my shabby, tattered things,
my hourglass heap of
useless things.

What do we do now?

*Come! Let's sit a while on the riverbank,
dangle our feet in the cool water
tell tall tales until laughter steals
our breath and our tears.*

*Come! Take My hand, cross the valley
there are things I wish to show you
things with such beauty they will
break your heart.*

*Come! Lean against My chest, rest under
the shade tree, eat from My picnic basket
at the table set with your broken things,
your shabby, tattered, useless things.*

Don't you recognize them?

⁶ "In appreciation to James Garcia, who sang Psalm 23 so that I could hear it for the very first time." Karen Dabaghian, *A Travelogue of the Interior, Finding Your Voice and God's Heart in the Psalms* (David C. Cook: Colorado Springs, 2014), 167-68.