



SHEPHERD, GUIDE, PROTECTOR AND FRIEND

PSALM 23

Psalm 23

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God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

(Ps 46:1–3 ESV)

When life spirals out of control, our most common response is fear. Even for those of us who are followers of Jesus, it is easy to lose focus and be overcome with anxiety, even despair. But the psalmist boldly proclaims that even when it seems as if the created order is coming unglued, God is exceedingly near and accessible as our refuge and strength. As we are in a serious pandemic that has spread to more than 115 nations and radically altered the way we live, the pastoral staff felt that we should expound text that would ground us in our faith and deliver us from fear. So today I have chosen Psalm 23, David's song of trust in the Lord's comprehensive care for us as our Shepherd. Derek Kidner writes, "Death and strength underlie the simplicity of this psalm. Its peace is not escape; its contentment is not complacency: there is a readiness to face deep darkness and imminent attack, and the climax reveals a love, which homes towards no material goal but to the Lord Himself."¹

Psalm 23 ESV

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

I. A Shepherd who Provides (Ps 23:1–4)

Psalm 23 depicts a typical day in the life of a shepherd with his sheep and, by extension, the journey of our lives under the care of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the day progresses the geography moves from "outside" to "inside" and God's care becomes more direct, personal and intimate. As Bruce Waltke explains,

The psalm consists of three vignettes (vv. 1-4, 5, 6). The first two are extended metaphors, envisioning I AM's relationship with the individual believer. 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, as reality replaces imagination, the psalmist is seen returning to the LORD's eternal house.²

The psalm opens with a bold confession, "**The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want,**" which establishes three essentials that form the bedrock of our faith. First, our relationship with God is supremely intimate—he is "**my shepherd.**" As Kidner notes, "Shepherd is the most comprehensive and intimate metaphor yet encountered in the Psalms, preferring usually the more distant 'king' or 'deliverer', or the impersonal 'rock', 'shield'; whereas the shepherd lives with his flock."³ David, a shepherd in his youth, would know this better than anyone. I suspect this metaphor was particularly close to his heart, recalling his own care for his sheep and fighting off the wolves that threatened them, then imagining how his Father in heaven was even more present, faithful and protective of him.

Second, we live in **absolute dependence** upon God's goodness and kindness to care for us. Without a shepherd, sheep would not survive, therefore the shepherd must provide everything for the flock—guiding, feeding, disciplining, healing and protecting.

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, whereupon they follow their shepherd's voice. Shepherds are inseparable from their flocks.⁴

And **third,** our relationship with God is based on **loving trust,** which is intensified when we are in a desolate wilderness. This is also often when heaven descends and God wraps us in holy comfort. The psalmist validates this truth by his experience, detailing the essential provisions the Shepherd provides of food and rest (v. 2), guidance (v. 3) and protection (v. 4).

A. Provides food and rest (v. 2)

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters. (v. 2)

Waltke explains, “The pastoral 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 requisite to life. The plural suggests the Shepherd never runs out of finding green pastures for his sheep.”⁵

The term “lead” is found in Isaiah 40:11 “when God, like a shepherd tending his flock, **gently leads** nursing animals with loving care,” and in 2 Chronicles 32:22 that same “God, through his gentle care, will provide for nations and individuals the sustenance they need and the tranquility in which to enjoy it (2 Chron 32:22).”⁶ Here the Shepherd “gently leads” his flock to waters in a choice resting place where, after they are fully fed and sated, they lay down for a midday nap. The words of the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel come to mind:

**My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,
in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. (Isa 32:18)**

I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. (Ezek 34:14)

Dr. Timothy Laniak has studied the lives of shepherds in the Middle East since 1977. In his book *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, he explains that getting a sheep to actually rest is no small feat (like getting a teenager with ADHD to sit still and focus).

What makes the impression so memorable is the lack of motion and restlessness that is so common. Sheep are usually on the move as they graze. They are easily provoked by other sheep or goats and typically shuttle around, clustering in their cliques. They panic easily when an unknown person is around. They seem overly sensitive to any changes in the environment. But when there is nothing and no one bothering them, and their stomachs are full, they just lie and ruminate in contented satisfaction... The scene of satisfied sheep is ironic in a way. The desert is a place of desolation and depravation, where all life is drawn toward death. But good shepherds can provide life-sustaining gifts for their flocks in this kind of place. And when they do, we see a perfect picture of rejuvenating satisfaction. It was in precisely this kind of region that God chose to self-reveal as provider and sustainer. “For forty years,” Moses reminded the Israelites, “*you lacked nothing*” (Deut 2:7).⁷

If God can cause sheep to rest, there must be hope for us in the midst of the demands and distractions of this world. In his book *Psalm 23*, Dave Roper writes,

Augustine cried out, “What will make me take my rest in you...so I can forget my restlessness and take hold of you, the one good thing in my life?” The compulsion begins with God. He makes me [causes me to] lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters...God makes the first move; He takes the initiative—calling us, leading us to a place of rest.⁸

While the world is panicked and closed in with fear with the Corona virus, perhaps the Lord is gently leading us to green pastures and still waters to be nourished on his word and to rest from the cares of this world.

B. Provides guidance (v. 3)

He restores my soul;

**He leads me in the paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake. (v. 3)**

He restores (*shuv* - “to return”) *my soul* acts as hinge between verses 2 and 3, uniting the themes of rest with ample provisions and guidance. On the one hand, “Restoration involves *returning* to a place of divine provision where comprehensive care is available and life is restored.”⁹ On the other hand, the same verb is used of straying sheep being *brought back* (Isa 49:5) under the discipling hand of the shepherd. This requires a different kind of *leading* than “gently leading to waters of rest.” The Hebrew word for “lead” (*nahag*) in verse 3 “suggests the kind of directive herding accomplished best from the back of the flock, when the will of the shepherd has to be imposed.”¹⁰ Waltke notes that it “is commonly used in situations of leading one safely through snares and triumphantly to a desired and promised destiny.”¹¹

“In the *paths* of righteousness” would be better translated, “cart tracks” or “wagon ruts.” “While the earth is soft, wagon wheels press the trails that others are obliged to follow after it dries and hardens.”¹² The Shepherd leads his sheep in well-worn “ruts of righteousness” that lead to ways of living that are beneficial to the community and us as well. The good Shepherd does this “for the sake of his name,” which is his reputation in the world. As we walk on these well-worn highways of holiness, we do so surrounded by “a great cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) who have gone before us.

C. Provides protection (v. 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. (v. 4)**

Along with providing food, rest and guidance, the shepherd must also guard his flock from danger. Psalm 121 suggests that the task of “watching” is a full-time job, for “he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps 121:4). There are times when the flock has to negotiate steep and dark ravines that are extremely dangerous, which the poet calls “the valley of the shadow of death.” But even in those perilous times, the sheep “fear no evil” because the shepherd is well equipped to ward off any dangers with his rod and staff. Laniak explains their use.

The staff is the symbol of care...with it a shepherd provides gentle assistance, direction, and encouragement at critical moments. It is made from a long, straight branch, with the “rook” traditionally formed by heating and bending the still-green end, and rubbing it with oil. The crook is useful for pulling branches down for goats, rescuing animals trapped just out of reach, and for nudging newborns to their mothers... [when sheep] get stuck in mud or worse, swept off by a flash flood, the staff becomes an extension of the shepherd’s arm, reaching carefully around the isolated creature and pulling it

back to safety...[it] can also guide sheep through a pass, lightly pointing the way with a shoulder tap. The staff gently separates sheep from each other when tension arises, and brings sheep together when they need to be. A simple stick becomes a tangible, tactile extension of the shepherd's voice, expressing his concerns or directions throughout the day.¹³

At the end of the day, I suspect none of the sheep were aware of how much they had been watched and cared for, just as we have no idea of how God's omnipresent, sensitive hand has protected us. Bruce Waltke's translation of Psalm 7:10 gave me a new appreciation for how proactive God is as our protector. The first line of the Hebrew text consists of just two nouns and one preposition—*magenni 'al Elohim (my shield / upon / God)*. Translators have difficulty knowing what to do with the preposition 'al ("upon"). But Bruce unravels the mystery, "The preposition marks a burden or duty that the subject feels with pathos as 'upon' him...[suggesting that] God takes it upon himself to be (i.e. feels the burden to be) David's shield."¹⁴ I was so excited with this new insight, I wrote Bruce, "I went to heaven on a mere preposition!" He wrote back, "I did too."

Certain times of the year shepherds must move the flocks deeper into the desolate wilderness, which made them vulnerable to predators. But the sheep need not fear, for their shepherd was armed with a "rod," which David used with great force against a lion and a bear (1 Sam 17:34–35).

[The rod was a club] made from the root of a tree with a natural bulb on one end. The shepherd could tuck this versatile weapon in his belt and use it for defense against both animal and human predators...once in a while, a shepherd might 'remind' straying animals with this wooden missile that their behavior is unacceptable. This important disciplinary function of the rod ensure the flock's safety and well-being.¹⁵

If a shepherd loses focus during his watch, things can go drastically wrong. A group of shepherds in Turkey learned this the hard way 15 years ago, when they neglected the villagers' sheep that had been entrusted to their care. Instead of staying with the sheep while they grazed, they left for a bit to eat breakfast, thinking they could keep an eye on the flock from a distance. But the sheep were grazing by a cliff edge, and one went over, perishing in a 15-meter fall. Then another, and another, then dozens, hundreds more until the whole flock, nearly 1500, leapt off that same cliff. About 450 died, crushed by the weight of those who landed on top of them. Because of the shepherds' negligence, an entire village was devastated by the loss of its precious sheep.¹⁶

Sheep are consummate followers to the nth degree. It is the shepherd's responsibility is to keep the flock on the right track in "ruts of righteousness" that lead us safely to pasture and then to our home again, lest we foolishly follow an errant sheep or leader and stampede off a cliff. By contrast, Psalm 84 describes the "blessed" individual as the one "in whose heart are the highways to Zion...they go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion" (Ps 84:5).

II. A Lavish Host who Embraces You (Ps 23:5)

You prepare a table before me

**in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows. (v. 5)**

The **second vignette** transforms the returned-to sheepfold into a **festive table**, heightening the notions of provision, restoration and protection in God's royal tent. Center stage is the Host, who has set a lavish banquet laden with expensive goblets filled with choicest of wines and rich food.

Waltke notes that "The verbal placing together of 'you prepare' and 'before me' suggests the intimacy of the Host and guest." In the Ancient Near East the host assumed ultimate responsibility for a guest's safety. As an honored guest in the house of God Almighty, one celebrates with absolute freedom and abandon, while enemies look on helplessly. "In the presence of my enemies" also suggests that God publicly endorses his blessing on your relationship, which is something Jesus often did before the evil eye of the Pharisees. In John 8:1-11, they brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and placed her before him, hoping he would condemn her. But to their surprise, he exposed their hypocrisy and guilt, but gave her a feast of forgiveness.

The anointing of oil "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."¹⁷

We've come a long way from a fatigued and weary sheep that survived a threat to an honored guest in the King's tent—who dons an apron to become your host, Top Chef and waiter.

III. Coming Home (Ps 23:6)

**Surely goodness and everlasting-love shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever. (v. 6)**

One would think that after being the guest of honor in God's house and eating and drinking at his table, "It couldn't get any better than this!" But it does! As Kidner observes,

In the Old Testament world, to eat and drink at someone's table created a bond of mutual loyalty, and could be the culminating token of a covenant. It was so in Exodus 24:8-12, when the elders of Israel 'beheld God, and ate and drank'; and it was so again at the Last Supper, when Jesus announced 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood' (1 Cor 11:25)...So to be God's guest is to be more than an acquaintance invited for a day. It is to live with Him.¹⁸

The psalmist suddenly realizes ("surely") that what occurred at this meal has transformed his life. The verb "pursue" (*radaf*) "is a term from warfare, and is reserved for the victor pursuing his enemies; here it receives a creative twist: 'only goodness and loyal-love will pursue me.'¹⁹ Instead of being pursued by enemies, he is pursued by God's goodness and a loyal-love that will not let him escape until he is safely home. From a moment of crisis, the poet has "returned" (a better translation than "dwell") to the Lord and permanent happiness.

The prophets Ezekiel (Ezek 38:24) and Micah (Mic 5:2, 4) predicted Messiah's role as a shepherd. Waltke notes, "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.”²⁰ Jesus is the “Good Shepherd,” who lays down his life for the sheep, gives them eternal life, and no one can snatch them from his hand (John 10:11, 28). He is the “Great Shepherd,” who equips us with everything good to do his will (Heb. 13:20-21); and he is the “Chief Shepherd,” who will reward under-shepherds, who sacrificially serve the flock and lead by example, with an unfading crown of glory (1 Peter 5:1-4).

On that day will be home in “our Father’s house—where there is father who never dies, makes a home for the lonely, who treats us like family; where real love awaits us; where we’re included—‘taken in.’”²¹ On that day we can exclaim, “It doesn’t get any better than this!”

**On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people’s disgrace
from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken.
In that day they will say,
“Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”**

(Isaiah 25:6-9 NIV)

1. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 109.
2. Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 435.
3. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 109-110.
4. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, general editors: Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit; Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1998), 782. Quoted by Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 437.
5. Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 438.
6. David W. Baker, “נָחַל” (*na’hal*), NIDOTTE, 3:44
7. Dr. Timothy S. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks: Rediscovering Biblical Leadership* (ShepherdLeader Publications, 2007), 90-91.
8. David Roper, *Psalm 23: Through Your Darkest Valley God is With You* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1994), 56.
9. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 91.
10. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 197.
11. See Exod 15:13; 32:34; Deut 32:12; Ps 5:8; cf. 78:14, 53; Isa 40:11; 49:10; Rev 7:17. Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 439.
12. Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 439.
13. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 95-96, 157
14. Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 81.
15. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 95-96, 157
16. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, 201.
17. Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 442-443.
18. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 112.
19. J.P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible: At the Interface of Hermeneutics and Structural Analysis, Volume 3: The Remaining 65 Psalms* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), 40.
20. Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 445.
21. Roper, *Psalm 23*, 143.

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