

## Sermon Series: *Summer in the Psalms*

# The Lord Is My Shepherd

## Psalm 23 (ESV)

A Psalm of David

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.
- 4 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.
- 5 You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever.

### A Psalm of David

This psalm is most likely THE most famous and beloved psalm of all the psalms. The superscription indicates that this is “A Psalm of David.” Let’s remind ourselves who it is who wrote this psalm.

David lived about a 1,000 years before Jesus. He was the youngest of eight sons and spent much of his time in the field keeping his father’s sheep. He was the second and greatest king of Israel. He is remembered in Scripture as “a man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22) and yet his heart, on occasion, went astray after beautiful women. He was a king who was just and fair<sup>1</sup> and yet he committed premeditated murder against one of his thirty closest friends.

He was arguably the greatest king Israel ever had and yet he was most likely a terrible father to his children. He brought nations under subjection to his reign, but he could not control his own sons.

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<sup>1</sup> See 2 Sam 12:5-6; 14:17.

He brought peace to Israel, but conflict was frequent in his own family. Yet one thing David did and did well; he loved the Lord God with all of his heart, which thus made him the benchmark for all subsequent kings of Israel.

This psalm is a psalm of praise of the LORD. David praises the LORD by presenting the LORD in two roles; 1) David praises Him as a Good Shepherd (vs.1-4) and 2) as a Gracious Host (vs.5-6).

## The Lord as a Good Shepherd

David here portrays God as a good shepherd. David himself is not the shepherd in this psalm, but he writes from the perspective of one of the sheep.

### Psalm 23:1 (ESV)

*1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

### The Lord Is... (v.1)

This psalm is about the LORD. LORD, you will notice, is in all caps. This is referring to Yahweh (YHWH), which is the personal name by which the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob revealed Himself to His people through Moses. This God, the one true God, Yahweh is the shepherd about whom David is writing.

### The Lord Is...My Shepherd (v.1)

This psalm is a love-psalm. David in this psalm is singing the praises of his wonderful God. He is giving us reasons why he loves his God. The Shepherd-God is the primary actor in this Psalm. All depends upon what *He* does. The sheep do nothing, while the Shepherd does everything.

Notices that David says that Yahweh-God is **my** Shepherd. This is very personal for David. He is not just *our* God, but He is *my* god. David is not simply pointing out some fact, some memorable point of trivia, i.e. that Yahweh is like a shepherd, but he is speaking about the personal relationship that he enjoys with his God, Yahweh.

Yahweh is God of all the earth<sup>2</sup>, the Creator of all that exists, the God who spoke into existence every molecule of energy that moves in the universe, but He is also **my shepherd**, says David. This same all-powerful, all-mighty, unlimited, eternal being, is **my shepherd**. 'This great God cares for me,' writes David. He knows me, personally. He is **my** shepherd. Not only is He the Sovereign Shepherd over all the nation of Israel, He is also **my shepherd**.

### Someone With Whom to Relate: Illustrating God from Common Experience

David refers to God as his shepherd. David can easily relate to the idea of 'shepherd' because he was a shepherd. David was a shepherd in his father's house. He was watching the sheep the day he was anointed king. David was a shepherd and to help people understand God, he speaks about God in a very real and understandable way. He uses common ideas and analogies that people would easily understand. His readers could easily relate to the idea of a shepherd because it was a common occupation. It is the habit of biblical writers to use illustrations of every-day life to explain the spiritual world.

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<sup>2</sup> Is 54:4, cf. Zech 14:9.

## I Shall Not Want (v.1)

This means that the kind of shepherd Yahweh is, is the kind who takes care of the needs of his sheep. David is writing this poem from the perspective of a sheep. Evidently he is comfortable with this and is not insulted by the idea that he is a sheep. He himself came up with the idea. ***I shall not want*** means that all the needs of the sheep will be taken care of. The sheep of Yahweh will lack for nothing good.

### **Psalm 84:11b (ESV)**

*No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.*

Does this mean the child of God will never experience deprivation? We know that it does not.

### **2 Corinthians 11:24-27 (ESV)**

**24** Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. **25** Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; **26** on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; **27** in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

### **Romans 8:35-39 (ESV)**

**35** Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? **36** As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;  
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

**37** No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **38** For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, **39** nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

No. The child of God is not exempt from deprivation. But this verse tells us that God and His love for us is to His children EVERYTHING they need *while* experiencing deprivation. During times of deprivation God can miraculously sustain his children. Moses was alone with (i.e. near) the Lord on Mt. Sinai for forty days and forty nights<sup>3</sup> and during that time he neither ate nor drank. And he did not walk down off that mountain with the emaciated face of a starving man, but literally with the glowing face of satisfied man.

The people of God who find themselves lacking the physical necessities of this world, as they by faith look to the LORD often find, themselves so filled with the goodness of God’s nearness, that the thing they thought missing, has suddenly been found.

The people of God who lack the goods of the world will by faith soon discover that having God Himself is a far better good than goods could ever be.

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<sup>3</sup> Ex 34:28-29.

## Psalm 23:2 (ESV)

*2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.*

Yahweh takes care of the physical needs of His sheep. He gives them food and water. He leads them to **green pastures** which provide abundant food and to **still water** which supplies abundant drink. Green pastures means plenty of food. Still waters are like cool mountain streams that gently flow down into the valley and are easy to drink from. This good Shepherd takes care of the daily needs of the sheep.

Listen to the words of Jesus.

### Matthew 6:25-33 (ESV)

*25 “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? 28 And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*

### He Knows How & Where To Lead His Sheep

He knows where green pastures and still waters are and He leads His sheep there. It is not up to the sheep to find green pastures. It is up to the Shepherd to do so. It is not up to the sheep to lead the way. Leading is the role of the Shepherd. It is for the sheep to follow the Shepherd—to listen for His voice and follow His lead.

Those who follow the leading of the Shepherd enjoy periods of **lying down**. This shepherd is not a hard master who drives his sheep beyond their ability. He leads his sheep to good and safe and peaceful places, allows them to have their needs met, and then gives them a place to rest. This shepherd is not driven by productivity. He gives his sheep rest.

### Psalm 127:1 (ESV)

*2 It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil; for He gives to his beloved sleep.*

There is a beautiful blessing that comes to those who so follow their Shepherd.

Often, when I am in prayer, I picture myself walking with Jesus beside a quiet stream on the edge of a field as I share with Him all my worries, fears, concerns, and requests. **He leads me beside still waters.**

Phillip Keller says sheep cannot lie down if they have any fear or if they are plagued by parasites. So this good shepherd gives them security and keeps the bugs away so they can rest easy.

### **Psalm 23:3 (ESV)**

*3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.*

#### **Restoration of Soul**

Not only does this Great Shepherd provide for the physical needs of his sheep, such as food and water, but he also provides for their spiritual needs—he **restores their soul**. David has personally experienced the restoration of his own soul by the Lord. He has written this phrase in the present tense indicating that this is an ongoing process. This presumes that the soul stands in a regular need of restoration and renewal. Being once filled with the goodness of the Lord's Spirit, does not mean that we never again have such a need. We need regular restoration. We go through times of pouring ourselves out in service for those around us until we ourselves need to come away, alone, with the Lord, so a place of spiritual restoration.

#### **Paths of Righteousness for the Sake of His Name**

Again David mentions the leading of the Lord, only this time the Lord is leading down paths of righteousness for the sake of His great name. God loves His own holy name above all things and all his children bear his name and represent Him to the people of the world. It is because of the greatness of His name that He leads his children into righteousness. This is one of the roles of the Holy Spirit. He sanctifies his people.

God often acts for the sake of his great name. He forgives our sins for the sake of his name. God has the reputation for being merciful and gracious and He will see to it that His people experience the reality of His reputation.

### **Psalm 25:11 (ESV)**

*11 For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great.*

### **Psalm 31:2-4 (ESV)**

*2 Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily!*

*Be a rock of refuge for me,  
a strong fortress to save me!*

*3 For you are my rock and my fortress;*

*and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me;*

*4 you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge.*

### **Psalm 79:9 (ESV)**

*9 Help us, O God of our salvation,  
for the glory of your name;  
deliver us, and atone for our sins,  
for your name's sake!*

### **Isaiah 48:9-11 (ESV)**

*9 "For my name's sake I defer my anger,  
for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you,  
that I may not cut you off.*

*10 Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver;  
I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.*

*11 For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it,  
for how should my name be profaned?  
My glory I will not give to another.*

Here we see God deferring his just anger so that he would be praised for being gracious and compassionate. If God's justice were to become preeminent, then the wickedness and rebellion of the people would cause them to be cut off. However, God has tried them in the furnace of affliction so that they would be purified from sin. The reason he did this was for the sake of his own great name. His name redounds to his great glory of being a merciful and forgiving God. His name is praised because of his grace and compassion and long-suffering steadfast love. So he patiently purifies his people for the sake of his great name. He leads his people down paths of righteousness for the sake of his great and holy name.

### **Psalm 23:4 (ESV)**

*4 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.*

[As I reached this verse in my preparation, I learned of what took place early Friday morning (20 July 2012) in Century 16 cinemas in theater number 9 in Aurora, CO. James Holmes, a 24-year-old Ph.D. student in neuroscience, allegedly [killed 12 people and wounded 58](#) others during the midnight showing of the Batman movie, "The Dark Knight Rises".]

This is the verse to which the grieving often flee for comfort during the dark days of mourning when one has experienced death. It seems today that death is the only sure means to get people of this nation to pray. Why is it that tragedy is the only time it is politically correct and acceptable to pray?



You can set up a temporary cross outside Century 16 theaters after a mass murder, but God forbid that you keep crosses set up all across this land in hope of preventing such evil in the first place.



Does anyone think that perhaps if we as a nation turned to God in prayer a bit more often than some of the heart-breaking grief and tragedy that we experience might be averted? If this nation were allowed to teach her children to love the Lord with all their hearts and pray to the LORD without ceasing, then would not this epidemic<sup>4</sup> of young people killing their peers be stayed?

It is the case that God often brings about calamity in order to cause people to return to him.

### **Amos 4:6-12 (ESV)**

*6 "I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,  
and lack of bread in all your places,  
yet you did not return to me,"  
declares the LORD.*

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<sup>4</sup> Multiple high school shootings: 1997 West Paducah, KY Heath HS (3 died), 1998 Jonesboro Middle School (5 died), 1999 Columbine HS (13 died), 2007 VA Tech (33 died), etc.

Cleanness of teeth is not a good thing. It means there is nothing to eat. It means there is famine in the land. God is saying, "I sent famine so that you would return to me, but you would not."

**7** *"I also withheld the rain from you  
when there were yet three months to the harvest;  
I would send rain on one city,  
and send no rain on another city;  
one field would have rain,  
and the field on which it did not rain would wither;  
8 so two or three cities would wander to another city  
to drink water, and would not be satisfied;  
yet you did not return to me,"*  
declares the LORD.

God is saying, "I sent drought so that you would return to me, but you would not."

**9** *"I struck you with blight and mildew;  
your many gardens and your vineyards,  
your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured;  
yet you did not return to me,"*  
declares the LORD.

**10** *"I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt;  
I killed your young men with the sword,  
and carried away your horses,  
and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils;  
yet you did not return to me,"*  
declares the LORD.

**11** *"I overthrew some of you,  
as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,  
and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning;  
yet you did not return to me,"*  
declares the LORD.

God is saying, "I sent pestilence and death so that you would return to me, but you would not."

**12** *"Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel;  
because I will do this to you,  
prepare to meet your God, O Israel!"*

I do not know exactly what God intends out of this tragedy in Colorado, but if you think God would never send calamity into the lives of people in order to turn them out of a path of sure destruction, then you do not yet know him well enough and you have not been reading your Bible closely enough.

Here is something God says He wants known around the globe:

**Isaiah 45:6-7 (ESV)**

*6 that people may know, from the rising of the sun  
and from the west, that there is none besides me;  
I am the LORD, and there is no other.  
7 I form light and create darkness,  
I make well-being and create calamity,  
I am the LORD, who does all these things.*

God is Sovereign over all things good and bad events in this world, including life and death.<sup>5</sup> Just before Moses died the LORD said to Israel,

*“I set before you today blessing and curse, life and death. If you love me and obey my voice, then I will bless your socks off. But if you despise me by turning away from me and loving other gods, which aren’t really gods at all, then I promise you that you will surly perish. So choose life so that you may live, both you and your children, for why would you choose to die?”<sup>6</sup>*

I believe that every time an apparently senseless calamity such as this happens, one of the purposes of God in it is to call people to repentance and to return to him. I believe this because this was the reaction of Jesus when someone pointed out to him a contemporary tragedy.

In Luke 13 someone came to Jesus and noted that Pilate had killed some Jews while they were offering sacrifices and suggested that they must have been pretty bad sinners for them to have endured such horrible suffering in death. Jesus said, *“Do you think they were worse sinners than everyone else living in Galilee? No they weren’t, but I tell you this, unless you repent you will likewise perish”* (Lk 13:3).

Then Jesus noted 18 people who died when the Tower of Siloam fell on them. Again Jesus said, *“Do you think they were worse sinners than everyone else living in Jerusalem? No they weren’t, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”* (Lk 13:5).

This is staggering but Jesus chose to use those events as a call to repentance. You may be thinking, “Well, this is all just wonderful news, but where is the hope?”

The hope of Psalm 23:4 is not that we will never experience death, but that we will never experience it *alone!* It is in this verse that David moves from speaking in third person to second person pronouns. He moves from speaking *about* God to speaking directly to God. He goes from saying, “he makes me lie down, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul,” to “*I will not be afraid, because You are with me and You comfort me.*” It is precisely in the shadow of death, that David begins speaking to God because God is right there with him!

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<sup>5</sup> In the song that Lord commanded Moses to teach Israel that they might forever remember, the Lord says, “*See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.*” Dt 32:9. Cf. 1 Sam 2:6; 2 Kg 5:7.

<sup>6</sup> My summary of Dt 30.

### The Rod & Staff

The rod and staff are the essential hardware of the shepherd. In this photo the rod is in the shepherd's left hand and the staff is in his right.

The rod is used for protection. It can be used as a kind of club to beat away predators. Shepherds can also throw the rod with great speed and accuracy.<sup>7</sup> Phillip Keller, author of *A Shepherd's Look At Psalm 23* who grew up in East Africa among herdsmen, recalls contests of young shepherds to see who was the most accurate in throwing the rod.



The staff however has a different purpose. It doubles as a walking stick for the shepherd, but it is also used for directing the sheep. It has a hooked end to it which can easily be slipped around the neck of a sheep in order to direct it. He can also hold it out against the side of the sheep to keep them from wandering away from the flock. The staff is also used to pick the sheep up if it gets stuck in some rut or in a tangle of thorns or briars. The rod and staff both come to represent to the sheep protection and deliverance, safety and security. Many enemies and predators lurk in the valleys and in the dark waiting to pounce upon the sheep. The shepherds use the rod and the staff to drive them away.



## The Lord as a Gracious Host

David now shifts from the imagery of a good shepherd to that of a gracious host. David is not the host, the Lord is and David here pictures himself as the guest who receives the blessing of his gracious host's generosity and beneficence.

### Psalm 23:5 (ESV)

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

This entire verse is a picture of the bounty of the Lord. The LORD prepares a table **before him**, meaning David is able to behold all the preparations before his eyes. The work and effort that went into laying out of the feast happens right in front of David's eyes. He sees the attention to detail and the wonderful food that would have been set out. The assurance of enjoying the tasty meal was right before him. He had but to reach out and taste it at the right time and his hunger would be satisfied.

There was something striking that appeared before him—his enemies. This could mean that this gracious host has not only invited you and lavished his goodness upon you, but also upon your enemies. Perhaps he is being just as kind and merciful to them as he has been to you.

Or this could mean that even though the enemies are watching this lavish feast, they are powerless to stop it. The gracious host is also so powerful that David's enemies are immobilized by the

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Keller, p. 93.

unassailable power of this gracious host. Given David's situation I think the latter is more likely David's meaning. In spite of all the evil that he had planned for David, God has turned their evil upon their own heads and instead of witnessing David's demise, they instead witness his exaltation.

God blesses David by anointing him with oil. This was customary for ancient near eastern hosts to do to honored guests (cf. Lk 7:46). The cup running over also points to an overabundance of lavish goodness. This is far better than just free refills on soda. This is an overflowing and abundant life.

### **Psalm 23:6 (ESV)**

**6** *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

The good news is that the graciousness of this good host does not end with the meal, but his goodness will be with you all the days of your life. Wherever you go, His goodness and mercy are with you, all the days of your life, even the bad ones. Even when this earthly house is removed, He will lavish upon you the great and merciful privilege of dwelling in His house forever. Goodness and mercy may indeed be the banner which flies over all your days but your days will come to an end. What then? Where is His goodness and mercy when your tent fails? Where will His mercy and kindness be when your house falls in? Answer: He will provide accommodation in His house forever.

John 10:11-15 (ESV)

[11] I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. [12] He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. [13] He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. [14] I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, [15] just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

David wrote Psalm 23 about Jesus whether he knew it or not. Jesus is the living fulfillment of this beautiful psalm. He is a shepherd worth believing in and worth trusting. Lift up your soul to this good shepherd.