

The Lord is my Shepherd  
Psalm 23

Turn to Psalm 23 please. The first summer Miranda was in our church, she took one of the summer Sundays. She sat on a chair at the front and gave us a 20 minute summary of her life. She has seen some long years. It was a good morning. She said near the end that every believer should memorize Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer, and make regular use of both.

I had often used the Lord's Prayer, but I did not have Ps 23 memorized at that time. But soon after she said that, I did memorize it, and that is one of the Scriptures I recite to myself, to help me on dark days, and start crawling out of the pit.

It is different when you say those words to yourself, you picture yourself saying these things to God. When someone else uses Ps 23, like I'm doing now with you, we all put on a holy face, and reverently nod our heads. Yes, yes, very true, very true, how wonderful it is.

But when I tell myself Scriptures like that, and the only one watching and listening is God, the holy face does not me get very far. I either have to find a way to mean it, to believe it, or I have to I find something else to say. So I recite it a few times, speaking to God.

I imagine it all being true about my life. I try to take this psalm as a pair of glasses to use on my life, glasses that show me things about my life that I would never see without these glasses. What if all this is true, I just don't see it, but the Psalm 23 glasses help me see my life more clearly. Maybe my normal vision is very poor, like Asaph in Ps 73 before he went to God's sanctuary.

If I do this with Ps 23 regularly, it makes a big difference. Maybe Ps 23 is true, just the way it reads. It helps me look at my life differently, and I think that's just what this psalm is for.

The Lord is My Shepherd

*The Lord is my shepherd.* Yahweh is my shepherd. It begins with God's name. In a sense, once we've said that, we've said the whole psalm. Yahweh Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, is my shepherd. This psalm does not begin with your life or mine at all. It's about Yahweh.

If Yahweh himself is your shepherd and my shepherd, how could it possibly be any other way than what's written here?

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.* If the Lord is my shepherd, what could possibly go wrong? There is no way I will not get good care. *The Lord himself is my shepherd, so of course I will lack nothing.* *If the Lord is my shepherd, it's impossible that I am neglected.* With some other shepherd, sure. But not if Yahweh is my shepherd, not a chance that I'm neglected.

The next four lines describe “sheep heaven.” If we were sheep, what could be better than this?  
*He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he restores my soul,  
he leads me along the right paths for his name’s sake.*

Green pastures, quiet waters, restoration, right paths. How could a sheep have it any better?

### For his Name’s Sake

Why does God do all this? For his name’s sake. The usual reason we tell each other for God’s care is that he loves us. He does love us, and the Bible often explains his care that way, but that is not the only way we are taught about his care. God thinks his reputation is at stake in his quality as a shepherd.

Reading Ezekiel gave me a new appreciation for how seriously God takes his own honour and reputation. Remember that this psalm began with God’s name. Read this through God’s eyes.

“I, Yahweh is my name, am this person’s shepherd. This child of mine comes to me for care. Shall I neglect her, and be mocked by my enemies for being a careless or fickle shepherd? Never. I will be the best shepherd this person could possibly have. I will take her to green pastures and quiet waters. I will restore his soul and lead him in the right path. Even my enemies will wish they had a shepherd like me. I will do this for my name’s sake.”

Paul writes this in 2 Timothy: *If we deny him, he will deny us. If we are faithless, he remains faithful; he cannot deny himself.* If we are faithless, he remains faithful. Why? Because he loves us? Yes, but that’s not the whole story. He is an utterly faithful God, and he cannot act any other way. This is about God’s own character and integrity. He does these things for his name’s sake.

Picture this: at the end of your life, you are before God, and he is welcoming you into his home. He replays the hard parts of your life, and he shows you then how he was carrying you all along, helping you, healing you, restoring you, guiding you, encouraging you. You and I will see then that he was doing everything that Ps 23 describes every day.

And he will ask you, “was I not being that kind of shepherd for you all along?” And you will agree, “yes, Father, you were all of this all along, I just didn’t see it.” And you won’t say that because it is the right answer, you will say it because you are convinced.

And if you hesitate to say “yes” on that day, God will think he has failed, not you. He failed, because he has not guarded his name and his promises. God shepherds you and me now, in such a way, that this hesitation will never happen to his name. God watches over us now with an eye on that day. Everyone will agree then, without any hesitation at all, that he has done all he said. For his name’s sake.

### The Darkest Valley

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley.* This can be translated either as darkest valley or valley of the shadow of death. Both are possible. There will be dark valleys, and death will probably be one of them, though not the only dark valley. The psalm never claims there won't be real dark valleys. Sheep have to walk through dark valleys sometimes, and they don't like it.

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

This is about fear. Fear is big, and common, and unpleasant. *I will fear no evil.* Bold words. *I will fear no evil, for you are with me.* Don't just tell yourself you won't be afraid. You can, I suppose, but that's not what's happening here. These are the first words spoken directly to God.

Look God in the face, and then say, *God, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.* "Whatever is out there, God, you are a lot bigger than it is." We need to imagine ourselves standing before God, and looking at him to say this: *God, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.* It is hard enough to say looking at God, but for me it's better than just saying it to myself.

*Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.* The rod was a club that shepherds used to protect sheep. Picture a short baseball bat worn at the shepherd's waist. And the staff was a longer lighter stick used to guide the sheep, keep it in on a safe path. "God, you are with me, and I can see that you have a weapon to protect me, and staff to guide me, and that comforts me."

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, even 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.*

My brothers and sisters, we cannot read Ps 23 and then afterward go back to our normal fears, unless we tell God why we do not believe this. We all have regular fears. That's a given. This is a psalm of confidence, of great confidence, and it corners us.

Take a minute right now to tell God the things we will continue to fear after this service is over. You know what you will worry about in the next day or two. Tell God the evils you will still fear. I'll give you a bit of time for that. What will we continue to fear?

Now, let's tell God why we will keep fearing these things. Why do we still worry? Either we do not think God is big enough to get us through this, or else he does not care enough. He is not big enough, or he does not care enough. Which is it? Tell God. Here's a bit of time for that, too....

For me, this psalm is one half comfort, and one half challenge. It comforts me, because in this psalm, God tells me he will take good care of me. It challenges me, because of how often I don't believe him. *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, O God, even the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

### The Victory Table

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

We leave behind the image of shepherd and sheep for the rest of this psalm. These last two verses say in direct human terms, what the first part said in the sheep metaphor. Sheep don't eat at a table, and they don't drink from cups. I've heard preachers talk about pouring oil on a sheep's head, but that is not the picture here. It's oil on people's heads, our heads.

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.* There are dark valleys, and there are enemies, but this is a powerful line. Given how the OT speaks of such things, these enemies are not dangerous anymore, they have been subdued, are out of commission.

Our enemies have been beaten, are no threat, and God prepares a celebration dinner for us. Yahweh himself is the waiter, the caterer, putting on a banquet in our honour. *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.* We are celebrating at a table, God is waiting on us, beaten enemies are in the background.

*You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.* Oil on the head was a mark of hospitality which we don't really understand anymore. In Luke 7, Jesus told an unpleasant Pharisee that when Jesus came into his house, he was not respectful. He did not give Jesus a kiss, he did not give Jesus water to wash his feet, and he did not anoint Jesus' head with oil.

When God sets the table, our head is anointed with oil, and he keeps our celebration wine full to overflowing. God likes big celebration meals. The kingdom of God really is like a banquet.

### Inescapable Love

*Surely your goodness and steadfast love will follow me all the days of my life.*

“Steadfast love” here is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which I mention once in a while. It means God's covenant loyalty, his family loyalty. It is what holds marriages and families together, that steady kindness and help that keeps us treating our family well even when they are not treating us very well. God has endless steadfast love. Even when we are faithless, he remains faithful.

God's goodness and steadfast love are *attached* to us, his goodness and steadfast love *stick* to us all the days of our lives. Ever single day, his goodness and steadfast love is *stuck* to us, we can't get way or leave it behind, we cannot escape. Wherever we go, these are right with us.

### Where it Ends

*And, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

I have said in the past, that in the OT, God's people did not have any sense of the afterlife, either with God or anywhere else. I have repented of that, I don't think that anymore. Too many OT Scriptures like this one. No doubt some of you knew all along that I was wrong.

We end up in God's house. Not complicated. A Father who brings all his children back home at the end. If Yahweh is our God, we end up in his house. What could be better than that?

Yahweh is our shepherd. Let's make that truth a pair of glasses through which we see our lives.

*The Lord is my shepherd, so of course I lack nothing.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.  
He guides me on the right paths for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, even the valley 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, your goodness and steadfast love will follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.  
Amen.*

PRAYER: Oh God, these are such wonderful words. We want so badly for this all to be true, just the way it sounds, but we have an awful time believing it. There is evil around, and dark valleys, and enemies, and we lose sight of this Shepherd. We look at the waves when we should look at you. Oh God, give us eyes to see, and ears to hear, give us a believing heart. We believe, help our unbelief. What a waste, for you to be doing this for us every day, and we go through our lives trembling, because we cannot risk believing it. Help us, lead us onto this path.

Part of us knows that this care of yours is real in our life, and it has been all along, even when we sense none of it. For all the ways you have done this, every day of our lives, we thank you. For every day that your goodness and steadfast love has been attached to us, stuck with us, we thank you. For every day you restored our soul and led us on the right path, we thank you. For every day in which we lacked nothing, we give you praise and honour, Lord God, our Shepherd. Amen.

BENEDICTION: Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep; may that God equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.