

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 had seen some hard 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, and still do, 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 are encouraged and reverently nod our heads. Yes, very true, how wonderful it is.

But when I tell myself this psalm, and the only one watching and listening is God, I get uneasy. This psalm can make me a liar. I either have to find a way to mean it, to believe it, or I have to 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, but I just don't see it? 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 difference. Maybe Psalm 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 shall 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 lets 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.*

If you quote this part of Ps 23, you are telling your friends about your great God. Imagine yourself standing up and telling your friends about your great God. “Have I told you about Yahweh my Shepherd? He has me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He leads me along the right path for his name’s sake.”

Can you say that to your friends? Don’t let Ps 23 make you a liar. If Ps 23 is going to come out of our mouths truthfully, perhaps we should change how we view God in our lives.

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, 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.

“I am Yahweh, and I am this person’s shepherd. She counts on me to take care of her. Shall I neglect her, and be mocked by my enemies for being a careless or fickle shepherd? Never. I will be the best shepherd possible. I will take her to green pastures and quiet waters. 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. He cannot deny himself. 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.

And he will ask you, “was I not 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, his children and his enemies, that he has done all he said. God does this for his name’s sake.

He restores my soul. Some days my soul feels pretty empty and beat-up. God wrote your soul and mine into his job description. He renews and strengthens my soul. Lamentations says his merciful care is new every day. 2 Corinthians says that God renews our inner person day by day. He restores my soul.

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." 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 to tell God what you feared the most in the last weeks. The problem with fear, as far as the Bible is concerned, is not how bad it feels to be afraid. The problem with fear is when it guides us more than God does. We go against God because what we fear demands it. In the Bible that's the danger behind fear, and that's why we need Psalm 23.

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. The things that scared us are right there watching us, and they are harmless and helpless.

Our enemies have been beaten, they 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 cup of celebration wine full to overflowing. God likes big celebration meals. God's kingdom 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. Lamentations 3 says, God your mercies are new every morning; in Hebrews “your *heseds* are new every morning.”

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 are with us, we can't get way or leave them behind, we cannot escape.

Where it Ends

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

In the Old Testament, usually God's people did not have much sense of an afterlife, either with God or anywhere else. But the Old Testament does have Scriptures like this one, especially in Psalms.

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 I shall not lack.
He lets 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 there are 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 of peace 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.