

## Reflections on Psalm 23

### Read Psalm 23:1-6

Psalm 23 is without question the most universally loved psalm of the Hebrew Bible. It may be the most well-known poem in the world! Scholars praise it as a masterpiece of lyric poetry; believers treasure it as a simple, yet beautiful, expression of trust. As one author commented, “There are few Psalms which are so well loved and well known. Its appeal lies partly in the simplicity and beauty of its poetry, strengthened by the serene confidence which it exudes.” (Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*) No survey of the Psalms would be complete without Psalm 23. And yet one of the potential obstacles to really seeing Psalm 23 is its familiarity. “The words might wash over us, giving us a warm religious feeling of comfort but without (necessarily) much or any understanding.” (Christopher Ash, *Psalms for You*) In that case, we need to slow down and look closer at the rich imagery of this Psalm that we might delight in it with greater depth and truly experience, with David, the Lord as our shepherd.

Psalm 23 is another psalm of trust (like Psalm 46 and Psalm 91) and another psalm of David; his loveliest miniature—only six verses! In this psalm we must think of David in two senses. On the one hand, like us, he is the “sheep” whose shepherd is the Lord. At the same time, David is the king, the shepherd over the flock of Israel (see Psalm 78:70-72). One of the most pervasive ideals of kingship in the ancient world was that of a shepherd. So the shepherd-king, David, expresses his trust in Yahweh as his shepherd, while at the same time he idealizes the characteristics of a human shepherd-king. In this way, the Psalm speaks ultimately of Jesus in these two senses: as the human Davidic King, God the Father is His shepherd in whom He trusts (Jesus sings this psalm!); as the final, eternal Davidic King, He embodies perfectly these qualities of the shepherd. In His own words, He is the “good shepherd” (John 10:11) who fulfills and continues to supply what is attributed to Yahweh, our shepherd, in Psalm 23. Like Psalm 22, yet in a different way, this psalm speaks exquisitely of Jesus!

Within these six verses there is the development of the single theme of the first verse: *Since Yahweh is my shepherd, I do not want.* This is a psalm of confidence, a poem of absolute trust. The point of this psalm is the comprehensive, compassionate care Yahweh gives to His people. No more fitting image from the Semitic world was available than the shepherd and his sheep. Let’s think on this theme and its development under the two movements of the psalm.

## 1. Yahweh as shepherd provides for my every need (v. 1-3)

“Yahweh is my shepherd!” Our familiarity with these words may rob us of their audacity. It is one thing to speak of God as Rock, King, Creator, Holy One, Shelter, but Shepherd!? No image is so touching as the image of shepherd. As shepherd, the Lord must identify with His flock; as shepherd, the Lord must always be near His flock; as shepherd, the Lord must fight for His flock; as shepherd, the Lord must be willing to die for his flock. This image David uses of God is among the loveliest in the Bible to describe the tender and compassionate care that God gives to His people; an image that came from David’s own life and experience as a shepherd. David’s boldness is heightened by the singular word “my.” It highlights David’s personal, exclusive relationship with the Lord. The sheep know the shepherd’s voice and will not follow another. The shepherd knows his sheep and calls them by name (see John 10:3, 14, 27).

Almost as audacious is the inference David confesses from the fact that Yahweh is his shepherd: “I do not want,” that is, “I lack nothing.” As a sheep, he is perfectly cared for, provided for, and protected. This is only true if he has a perfect Shepherd. Sheep are helpless and completely dependent on their shepherd; sheep without a shepherd are as good as dead! But a perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful, good shepherd provides perfectly. David then elaborates on this truth with luxuriant language to express his view of the abundant care God gives to His people.

- *“He makes me lie down in green pastures”* – sheep are full of fear; every disturbance, intruder, noise keeps them on their feet. They cannot lie down unless all fear is removed. This is what Yahweh accomplishes for His people. The abundance of God’s provision in green pastures goes far beyond the usual arid regions David knew in Judah.
- *“He leads me besides still waters”* – sheep are fearful of fast-flowing streams; turbulent water may induce moisture into the lungs leading to pneumonia; a slip on the bank may lead to drowning. Sheep have been known to die of thirst on the banks of a river. God’s provision meets our needs in a way they can benefit us best. He refreshes our vitality.
- *“He guides me in the paths (ruts) of righteousness”* – sheep are not driven along like cattle but follow the leading of the shepherd. In the rugged, arid terrain of Judah, it was critical for the shepherd to know the safe and sure path to green pasture. These were well-defined tracks; it would have been deadly for the sheep to wander off these paths! The Lord will not lead us astray, but in the safe and well-defined paths of righteousness.

He will do all this for “His name’s sake.” It points to the outworking of His name, Yahweh, which speaks of relationship to His people (“I will be with you”) and faithfulness to His covenant. God will always uphold His name!

## **2. Yahweh as a shepherd leads and provides through danger to final rest (v. 4-6)**

The safe and sure paths of righteousness do not avoid but go through the valley of deep darkness. “The ravines of Israel cut by the wadis at the bottom could be treacherous to descend and arduous to climb and could harbor wild animals. All in all, a sheep’s worse nightmare. So the valley signals the life-threatening, fear-generating situations of the Lord’s flock.” (Dale Ralph Davis) Yet, the psalmist does not fear this danger because “You are with me” (notice the change to the second person, direct address). The sheep hasn’t merely wandered off the path away from the shepherd into danger; the shepherd remains with him to protect and provide. Ancient shepherds had two implements, one for defense and one for care. The “rod” was a club which the shepherd might use to drive off a wolf or a lioness (or “to beat the daylights out of the sheep’s enemies!” – Davis). The staff was the shepherd’s crook (hook on one end) used to guide the sheep and at times rescue the sheep. With Yahweh as the Shepherd, the implements at His hand are limitless and His care boundless. No one will ever snatch us from the Shepherd’s hand! We have nothing to fear, even through the darkest of valleys.

Sheep seated at a banquet?! The provision of God for His sheep is so extravagant that David employs deliberate exaggeration and mixes metaphors to picture sheep seated at a banquet table prepared by the shepherd (so much better than grass!). Amazingly, this banquet is prepared in the presence, not the absence, of enemies. The sheep is aware of enemies, but does not fret about them because of the shepherd is near. “The dogs of the desert may stand off and salivate; they will not get a nip! They get nothing more than a whiff of a smell of the sheep when the shepherd is on duty” (Ronald Allen). The weary, dusty sheep is refreshed with oil and the provision of water is as abundant as that of wine for a guest at a great banquet. How lavish is the Lord’s care and provision for His sheep! Indeed, the only things that “pursue” the sheep are the Lord’s goodness and loyal love (*hesed*). The word “follow” is much too weak. The Hebrew word (*radap*) is a specific term of an animal on the hunt, like lions and wolves on the prowl. When the Lord is your shepherd, instead of being pursued by carnivores who are ready to rip you apart, the pursuers are the Lord’s goodness and mercy! And this pursuit is not occasional or fleeting, but relentless “all the days” of David’s (and your) life. Therefore, we can fully trust, like David, that the Shepherd will lead us safely to our eternal home to dwell with Him forever.

Pastor Mark

*Questions for Reflection:*

- How is knowing that Yahweh is *your* shepherd help to bring you contentment in difficult circumstances? What images of the shepherd are most helpful to you in relationship to God?
- What did David mean when he said that we “lack nothing?” How can this be true? Why do we tend to doubt this? What is the connection between the two statements of v. 1?
- How do Psalm 22 and Psalm 23 relate (David wrote them both! is it a coincidence they are back to back?)? In light of Psalm 22 (and David’s other sufferings), how could he say that “only goodness and mercy pursued” him all the days of his life?
- How does v. 4 give comfort in the midst of the darkest valley, death itself? How does this psalm make you feel about your future, especially your eternal future?

**Fulfillment by Christ**

This psalm was the song of Jesus in His humanity as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Just as Psalm 22 was the cry of His anguish in suffering on the cross, Psalm 23 was a prayer of His confidence of the Father’s provision all days of His life. But even more so, this psalm is a model of Jesus as a shepherd of His people. When He claims to be the “good shepherd,” He is claiming to be the fulfillment of the Shepherd of Psalm 23, which is Yahweh! For the green pastures, the still waters, the right paths, and the deep valleys to which we are led are the very places our Shepherd has gone before, and to which He now leads us, His sheep. We know His voice and we follow Him.

***Read John 10:1-30***

- What connections can you make with Psalm 23? In what unexpected way does Jesus fulfill the shepherd image?
- What difference does it make to you knowing that Jesus has gone through the valley of death for you?