



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
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Singing about Our Shepherd
Psalm 23

Her name was Josephine, and she knew she was dying. I was her young pastor, a seminary student, seeking to offer her comfort and encouragement.

I can still remember that day a few weeks before she died when I stood by her bedside at Rex Hospital in Raleigh reading Scripture to her from my trusty little *Revised Standard Version* pocket New Testament.

I read several passages, and she listened intently. I could tell she was drawing strength and comfort from God's word. I read several of the great passages like Psalms 42, 43, and 90, and Romans 8, and she listened appreciatively. But I can still remember how her lips began to move as she quietly recited these words with me as I read them:¹

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 fear no evil;
for thou art with me;
 thy rod and thy staff,
 they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
thou anointest 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
 for ever.

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version*.

Though I already loved it, the Twenty-Third Psalm has meant more to me ever since that day!

An old friend . . .

What is it about Psalm 23 that makes us love it so much? It's like an old friend who has stuck by us through the years through thick and thin, isn't it? We turn to it in times of joy to sing about God's goodness and care for us, and we turn to it in times of trouble to remind us that he's leading us as we go through the deepest, darkest valleys of life, indeed, even through "the valley of the shadow of death" (v. 4).

Maybe the greatest appeal of this dear friend is the beautifully profound simplicity of the image it gives us of our awesome God's relationship with us—the image of shepherd and sheep.

People in ancient Palestine knew about sheep. They saw them every day. Every day as they went about their work or as they traveled back and forth, they saw shepherds and their sheep. In fact, if you include lambs and rams, there are more than 500 references to sheep in the Bible.² And where there were sheep, there were shepherds!

Through the ages, most cultures have been able to relate to this image. Even today in the Middle East, shepherds and their flocks dot the hillsides, and cars and trucks sometimes have to stop on the roads to let them cross!

This beloved psalm is attributed to King David. He was a musician, and before he was a warrior and a king, he was *a shepherd*. He knew sheep, and he knew how a good shepherd cares for his sheep. So it's not surprising that he would use this image to sing about God's goodness. That's what this psalm is, after all—a song about our Shepherd.

What are sheep like? They're often affectionate, and usually not aggressive. They're not very smart, they're usually dirty and don't smell good. They can be destructive, eating grass down to such a nub that it can't grow back. They're helpless, and constantly need care and supervision.³ Sheep always need a shepherd. A good shepherd saves his sheep from themselves as well as from their enemies!

Now in the Old Testament, God is often pictured as the shepherd of his people Israel. But here the psalmist *personalizes* the relationship—"the LORD is *my* shepherd . . ." In a sermon on this psalm, Wayne Stacy notes that this image of God as shepherd is so deep and pervasive in Scripture that in the New Testament, there is *only one place* where a literal reference to shepherds occurs. That's in Luke 2 when the birth of the Good Shepherd was announced to the shepherds in the field. Everywhere else that the word shepherd is found is a reference to either God or Jesus!⁴

Maybe that's part of the reason this psalm is such a dear old friend that both comforts us in our trials and griefs and expresses our joyful confidence in the Lord.

It's so beautiful, isn't it? It's so moving! It's so simple, yet so profound! The beauty of its poetry in the Hebrew carries over to the English translations, especially in the classic rendition of the beloved King James Version and the translations in its tradition (RSV, NRSV, ESV, NASB). One of my seminary professors, in talking about Bible translations one day, said that any pastor who reads the Twenty-Third Psalm at a funeral from anything besides the King James Version ought to be shot! I've heeded that admonition ever since—the reading, not the shooting!

But the appeal of this old friend is more than just the beauty of poetry. It's the power of the

² B. D. Napier, "Sheep," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, R-Z* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 315.

³ Napier, *IDB*, 316, and R. Wayne Stacy, "The Hound of Heaven," in *The Search: The Soul's Secret Signature* (Nashville: Fields Publishing, 2000), 43.

⁴ Stacy, 43.

image, the metaphor of God as our shepherd, as “*my shepherd.*” Taken together, the poetry and the images combine to make it, in my opinion, the most beautiful and certainly the most beloved of all the psalms. It’s probably been read at more bedsides and more funerals, and offered more comfort than any other psalm, indeed, maybe than any other Scripture!

Singing about our Shepherd . . .

And so we sing with David about our Shepherd.

Sometimes we sing it with all the joy and exuberance of Handel’s *Hallelujah Chorus*, praising God for all his care and his abundant, overflowing blessings.

Sometimes we sing it in a minor key, looking for comfort and strength and assurance when our hearts are weighed down with troubles and trials, heartaches and grief, or depression and despair.

You can sing it either way, and it works. Because when we sing it, it reminds of us of three things—three truths that we celebrate in the midst of blessing, three realities that give us help in our helplessness and hope in our hopelessness.

When we sing about our Shepherd, we sing about *his provision*. The LORD provides everything we need (23:1-3). David’s description of God’s care here is all-inclusive: “I shall not want”—in other words, “I won’t lack for anything.”

Our shepherd gives us *security* (“he makes me lie down”) and *sustenance* (“in green pastures” where there is abundance of food). He gives us *rest* and *refreshment* (“He leads me beside still waters” or “waters of rest” and “restores my soul”). He gives us *guidance* (“He leads me in paths of righteousness of his name’s sake”).

David knew in his relationship with the LORD what Jesus described in John 10. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus said that he had come to lay down his life for his sheep—no other shepherd would go to that point for his sheep—and that through his sacrifice we, his sheep, could have *abundant life*. So when we put our trust in Jesus, we experience the kind of life David was talking about here—a life where our Good Shepherd provides us with everything we need!

That sort of makes believable the story I once heard about a little girl accidentally reciting the psalm this way: “The LORD is my shepherd, he’s all I want . . .”!

So we sing about our Shepherd’s provision.

We also sing about his *protection* (23:4).

Now experiencing abundant life where our Shepherd provides all our needs doesn’t mean that we never face any difficulties or dangers or hardships. Not at all!

Rather, it means that he protects us when we do!

David knew that even in the darkest valley, he could trust in the LORD and not fear, knowing that he was with him. Using this shepherd metaphor, he described God’s protection in terms of his rod and staff, the two basic tools of an ancient shepherd.

The rod was a club used to drive off predators. The staff was a shepherd’s crook, a long pole with a crook on the end to guide and also to retrieve sheep. I have heard that when a shepherd was leading his sheep along a ledge, he would tap his staff on the edge. As long as the sheep heard the tapping, they would know where to walk, and were at ease.

David said God’s presence drove away his fear, and his rod and staff brought him comfort, whatever he was facing.

In John 10, Jesus gives us this same kind of assurance as the Good Shepherd. He told the

Jewish leaders who were challenging him that his sheep hear his voice, that he knows them, and they follow him. And as they do, no one can snatch them out of his hand or his Father's hand, and that he and the Father are one.

In other words, even in the deepest, darkest valleys of life—even in the valley of the shadow of death—we can be sure that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is leading us and that he will care for and protect us no matter what we're facing! Indeed, even when our time to die comes, we can trust him to shepherd us to the other side to our eternal home.

Finally, since our Shepherd is also our gracious host, *he continually graces us with his presence.*

David makes a subtle shift in images here to God as the great host. Traditionally, we southerners have been known for our hospitality, but our hospitality pales in comparison to the LORD's!

David says that God made him his guest of honor, spreading a table even while his enemies looked on, anointing him with scented oil as a sign of his favor and blessing, giving him more than he could receive, filling his cup until it ran over. Because of all this blessing, David declared that God's goodness and mercy (his steadfast love) would follow him all the days of his life, and that he would remain in God's presence always.

Sometimes we say or sing that truth so much that we begin to lose sight of just what it means or we misunderstand it altogether.

I once read about a famous castle on the hill at Heidelberg, Germany. Over the arched castle entrance, twin angels are carved into the stone portal—they're named Goodness and Mercy, an obvious allusion to this beautiful psalm.

A little girl visiting the castle with her family heard the tour guide talking about the two angels and asked, "But where's the third one?"

The guide said, "Third one? What do you mean the third one?"

And she said, "Shirley. Where's Shirley? You know, like the Bible says: Shirley, Goodness, and Mercy shall follow me . . ."⁵

Now there's following, and then there's following. And the following David was talking about here was *pursuit*. According to Dr. Elmo Scoggin, who taught Hebrew at Southeastern Seminary for more than 30 years, the image is that of a breed of hound dogs in ancient Israel called salukis. They could pick up a trail as much as eight days old, and once they picked it up, they never gave up. That's the picture David gives—God's goodness and steadfast love hounding him day after day!⁶

What more can we ever ask for than to be in God's presence, for him to be our gracious host? We experience this in this life as we enjoy fellowship with him in a right relationship through faith in Christ. And one day, we'll experience it in his presence for all eternity.

And so we sing about our Shepherd! *We sing about his provision, his protection, and his presence with us in this life.*

And do you know what's even more amazing? That as John put it in Revelation 7, when we leave this life and we're there with God around his throne, praising and serving him day and night, sheltered in his presence, we will hunger no more and thirst no more, nor be struck by the sun or any scorching heat, because even then,

⁵ Stacy, 46.

⁶ Stacy, 46.

. . . the Lamb in the midst of the throne
will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs
of living water;
and God will wipe away every tear
from their eyes.

Will you say it with me? “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”

†*MEG*