



Shepherded: God's Tender Attentiveness Behold Our God! – Read the Bible for Life Series #23

Psalm 23:1-4

David Sunday

March 18, 2012

Please turn in your Bibles to that most famous of psalms—Psalm 23. We're looking in these weeks before Easter at Psalms 22, 23 and 24 in that order.

- Psalm 22 showing our **Good Shepherd** as He laid down His life for His sheep and bearing His cross.
- Psalm 23 shows us our **Great Shepherd** as He lives now to guide His sheep through the dark valleys of this life. He also has a crook in His hand—the Shepherd's crook.
- Psalm 24 shows us our **Chief Shepherd**, Who has gone before us into glory, wearing a crown. He is there so He might glorify us so that we too might ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in God's holy place. Psalm 22 is the psalm of the cross. Psalm 23, the psalm of the Shepherd's crook and Psalm 24, the psalm of Christ's crown.

We're going to spend two weeks in this lovely psalm together. Let's stand together as we read God's Holy Word. Psalm 23, a psalm of David:

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.*

Lord, we need special help when we come to words like this. We need help that our familiarity with them would not breathe in apathy and dullness in us. We acknowledge, Lord, that these words have been precious to Your people for 3,000 years, sustaining them on their death beds, reviving their strength as they've gone through deep suffering. These words comfort us and correct us and bring us back into Your ways. Lord, there are few words in the entire world that are more precious than these and so we pray that we would taste and see their preciousness. Lord, I also pray for help that in the process of preaching these words, I would not dissect something that is so beautiful. It would be better for us to just soak in it and drink deeply from it; to take a quiet walk through its gentle pathways. So I pray, Lord, that Your Spirit would guide in the preaching and in the hearing of Your Word; that Your sheep would hear the voice of Christ their Shepherd and be strengthened by His grace. And that those who are not yet of Your fold, whom You are laboring to bring, Good Shepherd gather them in in I pray. In Your name. Amen.

Many people can quote Psalm 23 by heart but there are many who admire its poetry and know nothing of its power. One of the reasons Psalm 23 does not affect many of us as deeply as it should is because we don't see ourselves as the sheep that this psalm is addressing. In order to have the words of this psalm penetrate your life and powerfully affect you, you need to acknowledge, "This is who I am. I am a sheep."

I remember my former pastor, John Sales, saying very often, "When God decided to call us sheep, He wasn't paying us a compliment." Sheep are noted for not being a very intelligent animal. I remember reading an article from a middle-Eastern newspaper that was entitled, "Four Hundred Sheep Fall off Cliff in Turkey." It described how hundreds of sheep followed their leader off a cliff, plunging to their deaths while shepherds looked on in dismay. Four hundred sheep fell 15 meters to their deaths in a ravine in Van Province, eastern Turkey. But they broke the fall, thankfully, of another 1,100 animals who survived. The shepherds were just eating their breakfast and neglected their flock. They let their sheep roam free and that breakfast cost them \$74,000.

Now sheep don't normally commit suicide—not knowingly at least. Their problem is that they don't have sufficient intelligence; they'll follow their leader wherever he goes. They'll even put their own lives in jeopardy. If their leader wanders off a cliff, the sheep go down ignorantly with him. Sheep are helpless. Sheep are powerless. You've probably never

seen anyone being run down by a herd of wild sheep. They're easily confused. They're lost. They are in need of a strong, wise, faithful shepherd.

The Bible says, "*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way...*" (Isaiah 53:6a). That's one of God's favorite descriptions of His people—we are sheep. We're the flock of His pasture. We're under His constant care. If you recognize that you need a Shepherd, Psalm 23 is precious to you. I want to remind us, as we concentrate on the first four verses, of five qualities of our Shepherd's care; qualities that should bring us great comfort and confidence if we're part of His flock.

If you're not yet under His leadership, if you're not yet following Jesus as your Shepherd, I would hope these words would be used of God to make you say, "Oh, I need this in my life. I want to be cared for and led like this. I need a Savior." Jesus loves to gather more sheep into His fold. He's doing that even as His Word is proclaimed now.

Here are five qualities of our Shepherd's care from the first four verses.

1. God's Shepherding Care is Personal

He provides personal, tender, intimate care. This psalm is for everyone who can say, "The Lord is **MY** Shepherd. He's **MINE**." There's an assurance here. There's a confidence here. Not, "**IF** the Lord is my Shepherd." Not, "I **hope** the Lord is My Shepherd." But "The Lord **IS** my Shepherd." He's not just the Shepherd of the world-at-large. He doesn't just care for all people everywhere; He cares especially for His sheep—His flock. He cares individually for His flock.

He watches over me. He cares for me. He preserves me. David speaks in the present tense here: "Whatever I face; wherever I am; as constantly as I need Him, the Lord **IS** my Shepherd." He's intensely personal about this. Look through this psalm and count the personal pronouns:

*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.*

If you go through the whole psalm like that, do you know how many personal pronouns you'll find in this psalm? Seventeen. There are seventeen personal pronouns in six verses. Someone has said that Christianity consists of personal pronouns. The

Christian faith is not merely a creed. It's not merely a set of doctrines that we believe (as important as those doctrines are). Those doctrines undergird a very personal, intimate relationship between the Lord and each of His people. To be a Christian is to enter into that personal relationship; to come under the personal care of the Lord Jesus Christ as your Shepherd, knowing that He watches over you. That's why the song we're learning right now is so evocative because it continually speaks to our hearts and reminds us, "He cares for me."

"*The Lord is my Shepherd.*" Who is the Lord? He's the great I AM—the self-existent, eternal, self-dependent God. He depends on no one. All powerful. All wise. All knowing. This God, the great I AM, has become my Shepherd. A Shepherd is not a glorious occupation. It's tiresome. It's wearying. It requires constant care and attention. There's a reason why people don't want to be shepherds. There's a reason why David was the youngest of the brothers and he was the one who was assigned to be the shepherd because it was not a glamorous occupation. But here the great I AM condescends in humility to call Himself the Shepherd of His people. Martin Luther called this the "sweet word"—He's my Shepherd. It's glorious to think of God as our King, our Lord, our Sovereign, our Creator.

But Luther said. "All those titles can strike fear into our hearts but not the word Shepherd." The word Shepherd speaks to us of God's nearness. It speaks to us of His consolation to us; of our security in Him because a Shepherd lives with His flock.

"*The Lord is my Shepherd.*" Sheep know their Shepherd's voice. They follow Him. They obey Him. A shepherd means everything to his flock—He's their guide, their provider, their physician, their protector. So, "The Lord is MY Shepherd—He means everything to me. He's my Guide, my Provider, my Physician, my Protector.

So this psalm is for people who listen to the voice of Jesus in Scripture. This psalm is for people who follow the commands of Christ. Those who do not listen to Him are not called sheep in the Bible—they are called goats.

God's shepherding care is personal.

2. God's Shepherding Care is Resourceful

The second thing we see is that God's shepherding care is resourceful. Look at verse one again: "*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not **want**.*"

Don't think of the word want here as desire. It's not saying, "I have no desires." It's saying, "God, I trust You to supply all my needs—I have no lack."

Bank on this foundation if you're a Christian. All your days God promises to meet your needs. Neither now nor at any time in the future will I face a circumstance when I lack something I truly need. My Shepherd is able to supply my needs and He is willing to supply my needs. He not only feels responsibility for me but He takes responsibility for me. Whenever I need to serve Him and accomplish His purpose in my life, He will give me what I need to accomplish that.

A great verse that serves as a commentary on this phrase is Psalm 84:11b, "*No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.*" Or Philippians 4:19, "*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*" So whatever I need in order to live before God for His glory, He will supply.

- If I need trials; God will give me trials. He will be very generous in giving me all the trials I need in order to sanctify me.
- If I need comfort, he will be generous in giving me comfort.
- If I need a good spanking, He will be faithful to give me the rod.

All that I need—there's no limit. The extent of my need is the extent of His supply.

I love this statement from David Platt: "Even when the Lord takes away, He never stops giving."

- If I'm facing pain, He gives me His peace.
- If I'm facing confusion, He gives me His wisdom.
- If I'm feeling my weakness, He gives me His strength.

He never cuts off His supply for my needs. He never stops giving. He never malnourishes His sheep. I have a resourceful, generous Shepherd; I lack nothing. It means I can relax; I can smile; I can trust God. I can enjoy my life with His leadership knowing that He's taking good care of me. Your Shepherd's care is personal; it's resourceful and thirdly (verse 2) it's thoughtful.

3. God's Shepherding Care is Thoughtful

He's attentive to what we need, when we need it. Verse two says, "*He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.*" He's always thinking about the needs of His flock. He's like a good family man who thinks about the needs of His children. When we need rest, He makes us lie down in green pastures. When we need refreshment, He brings us to the quiet waters to revive our souls.

I remember when our two oldest kids were very young, we took a trip to Prince Edward Island off the east coast of Canada. It's very far away and it took forever to get there. On the first day, I made the mistake of thinking we could get to Rutland, Vermont by way of Niagara Falls—all in one day. So we left Carol Stream at 5:00 a.m. We breezed through Niagara Falls—hardly had a chance to look at it. Then we kept right on going to Rutland and finally arrived there until 3:00 a.m. So rescheduling needed to take place in order to tend to the needs of my little flock. The next day, we just slowly drove around Vermont. We visited the Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream factory; played on the swings and got replenished. Then that night we drove all the way to Bangor, Maine—which also took forever.

But as God looks over His flock, He's attentive to when we need to lie down. Getting sheep to lie down is a notoriously difficult task for shepherds. I read a couple stories of shepherds that explain the different things that can agitate a flock of sheep. Sheep get really upset if someone comes and starts talking loudly or if a car drives by or if there's a bully in the flock that wants to boss the other sheep around. If flies or insects swam around the flock, they get very agitated and cannot lie down and rest. Especially when they're hungry, they will not rest.

As a Good Shepherd, God knows how to bring rest to our souls. He knows how to deal with the things that antagonize us and make us afraid. Jesus knows how to deal with our bullies. Jesus knows how to put our problems in perspective. *"When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul"* (Psalm 94:19 NASB). When we feel like our feet are slipping, His steadfast love holds us up. He knows how to repel the insects and things that annoy us and destruct our peace. He can satisfy our hungry souls.

And where does He do that? In the green pastures of His Word. The Word that we sing about and that we read in Psalm 119—He takes us there and makes us lie down there. He knows how to settle us down. Sometimes the only person Who can do that for you is your Shepherd. You're running, your mind is racing, you're anxious and agitated and you need Him to come to you and say, "You need to settle down here. You need to lie down here and rest." He can do that.

Not only does He feed you in the green pastures but He revitalizes you at the still waters with the waters of the Holy Spirit. But it's not sufficient to merely feed on the Word and take in truth. We also need to drink the water of the Spirit in order to be nourished by

the Word. If all we did was take in truth, we would find ourselves getting bloated and getting indigestion.

I read about a sheep that got lost in a patch of grass on a little cliff side. The sheep got down but he couldn't get back up. He was probably there about a week and had eaten up all the grass nearby but there was no water. That sheep died a couple days later because that food formed a hard ball in its stomach and could no longer nourish the sheep. It actually killed him.

Likewise, if all we do is take in truth but don't have the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit to make that truth alive in us and apply it to our lives in His sanctifying way, the truth won't nourish us alone. It's the Word and Spirit together Who nourish us and Jesus knows how to lead us to where we can both drink of His Spirit and feed on His Word.

His care is very thoughtful—very attentive to what we need when we need it.

4. God's Shepherding Care is Dependable

Our Shepherd's care is also dependable. We see this in verse three, "*He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*" Think about that a minute. "*He restores my soul...He leads me.*"

Not only does He lead us, He also provides the strength for the journey. He'll never put us in a place where His own grace cannot restore and revive our souls. When the way is difficult and we wander from Him, He knows how to bring us back. He goes out looking for us. When we're loaded down with burdens, He knows how to relieve our load. When we're feeling like our spiritual life is languishing, He knows how to revive and refresh and replenish that life. The Message paraphrases that phrase as "you let me catch my breath."

He gives us enough strength to follow Him wherever He wants to take us next. That's why we don't lose heart. Though our outer being is perishing—fading away—our inner man is being renewed day by day the Apostle Paul says (2 Corinthians 4:16). That's the work of our Shepherd in us—restoring, reviving again and again.

If you're one of His sheep, you can depend on this. If you feel like you're languishing spiritually, you can go to your Shepherd and say, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek Your servant for I do not forget Your commands. Replenish me. Revive me. I open my mouth and I pant with longing for Your commandments. Oh, open my eyes Lord that I may behold wonderful things in Your Word." Through the Word, the Shepherd restores your soul.

"He leads me in paths of righteousness..." Each Christian's path is unique. God has a different journey for every one of us. No two Christians are on exactly the same road but one thing all our paths have in common is that they are right paths. They are paths of righteousness. They are well-worn tracks. They are the paths He's been leading His people on for many years. They are the ancient ways; the ways of God's Word. God will never lead us in a way that takes us apart from His Word. God will never lead us along a path that takes us outside His will or makes us go against the example of our Great Shepherd.

He leads us in paths of righteousness and we know He will be faithful to do this because He stakes His Own reputation on how He cares for His sheep. He does this, David says, *"...for His name's sake."* For His glory. God says, "My glory will be seen in how I care for My people. I will care for them in such a way that My reputation will be seen in all the world as the faithful, caring, good Shepherd that I am."

God does all these things for us that we can't do for ourselves. We don't know how to lie down and feed. We don't know how to find the still waters. We easily languish and need reviving. We go astray; we get off the paths. He does all this for us. It's all a work of His grace and it's all for His glory— *"...for his name's sake."* God would have to abandon His Own reputation before He would stop caring for you.

5. God's Shepherding Care is Watchful

In verse four, your Shepherd's care is watchful. Dependable. Thoughtful. Resourceful and personal. That's our Shepherd's care. Look at verse four—the watchfulness of our Shepherd. David says, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."*

Remember that right paths are not always pleasant paths. He's always leading us in paths of righteousness but those paths are not always pleasant. Sometimes they're terrifying. Sometimes they're dark. Sometimes it's the valley of the shadow of death but notice what David starts doing when he passes through death's dark valley.

In verses one through three, he's been talking **about** God—"here's what my Shepherd does for me." But in verse four, he starts talking **to** God. *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me...my Shepherd..."*

Have you ever noticed how the dark valleys of your life draw you closer to God? Have you ever noticed how the dark valleys make your theology more personal for you?

Suddenly it's not just things you believe about God but you must enter into a personal experience of these things. Your theology must become a prayer. Propositions about God need to be turned into prayers to God.

John Piper says that we should never talk very long about God without talking to God. We should never just be content to say, "God You are sovereign" without also saying, "God, I trust in You." Or "God You are glorious" without saying, "God, I admire and adore Your glory." Our theology must be turned into worship. The precepts of God's Word need to be turned into prayers and this is what this psalmist does here. He's walking through the valley of the shadow of death but he's not going to fear evil in it. He's afraid but he doesn't fear any evil in it because his Shepherd is with him now—not just going ahead leading him but He's actually with him, right beside him.

Through this valley, my Shepherd's care is watchful and He's got a rod to drive off my enemies and He has a staff to comfort me. That rod and that staff are comforting to me because I know He can fight off any danger that's in my path and I also know He can correct me if I start to go astray. That's what David takes comfort in here.

Notice in these words, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..." Matthew Henry said there are four words in verse four that lessen the terror of the dark paths we may find ourselves on.

- **Shadow.** It's just the shadow of death. For those who are in Christ, even your worst enemy—death itself—does not have substantial evil in it. It's just a shadow. The shadow of a serpent can't strike you. The shadow of a sword can't kill you. The shadow of a dog can't bite you. These are just shadows and wherever there's a shadow there must be light behind it. You can't have a shadow without having a light. So he calls it the valley—not of death—but the valley of the shadow of death. Behind death itself there is the great light of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ. Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:10 that God has brought life and immortality to light through Jesus Christ. So whatever you may go through, as dreadful as it may appear, remember the dreadfulness is just a shadow. God is with you in it.
- **Valley.** Valleys can be deep and dark and dangerous and scary but they can also be very fruitful. When God takes us into these dark places, along these dark paths, remember there's fruit there in the midst of the suffering. There's comfort in the midst of it.

- **Walk.** This third word that is comforting is “walk.” Walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Matthew Henry said, “The wicked are chased out of the world and their souls are required of them but the saints just take a walk to another world as cheerfully as they take their leave of this one.” We’re walking to Zion. We’re going from grace to glory. From one degree of strength to the next.
- **Through.** Oh, we walk through the valley of the shadow—that means we’re going to get to the other side. It means we’re not going to get lost down in this dark valley. We’re going to reach the other side because we’re not alone—God is with us. God is watchfully caring for us. He’s making sure we’re shepherded to the other side.

And that brings me to probably the most pressing question that we should be asking ourselves about this psalm which is, “Do you know that this God is your Shepherd? Do you know that you are under His care? Do you know that when you go through those dark valleys, you won’t be going through them alone but you’re going to have Jesus caring for you? Do you know that Jesus knows how to do it very well because He’s not just our Shepherd, He’s our Shepherd Who became a Lamb? He became “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29). He Himself became a sheep. He walked through life’s dark valley. He went through the valley of the shadow of death. He died on the cross and He was raised from the dead so that He, the Lamb of God, can lead His sheep to streams of living water forevermore. He’s a perfect Shepherd because He’s the only Shepherd Who has been a sheep and He thus knows how to care for His sheep very well.

The Bible says in 1 Peter 2:24-25, “*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*” Is that your story? Is that true of you? Have you returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your soul? Is Jesus your Shepherd? It’s one thing to know He’s a good and great Shepherd; it’s another thing all together to claim Him as your own. Do you know Him personally? You can.

Let’s bow our heads and pray together. In the quietness of this room, are you thinking, “I am lost in this world and I desperately need Someone who has the wisdom and power to guide me, to lead me on right paths, to supply my needs.” Jesus is present now. He is alive now to gather you into His fold. I would invite you to pray with me right now

and to express your need for His Shepherding care and to submit your life to His leadership.

Oh God, this is true of us—we are sheep. We cannot find our way. Lord, I am lost without You and I'll wander in the darkness and would die there if You do not rescue me. God, thank You that Your Son, our Shepherd, became a Lamb. Thank You that He walked through this life's dark valleys. Thank You that He laid down His life on the cross to pay for my sins. Thank You that He did not remain on the cross but was buried and You raised Him from the dead and He now lives as the Chief Shepherd to work in us everything that is good for the doing of Your will. God I need Him to lead and guide me. I submit my life to You, a helpless sheep. Savior, be my Shepherd. Carry me through this life into glory where You are so that I may live in Your presence forever. Lead me to the streams of living water. Make me lie down in the green pastures of Your Word. Satisfy my soul for Your name's sake, I pray. Amen.

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