



## Hosted: God's Generous Hospitality Behold Our God! – Read the Bible for Life Series #25

Psalm 23

David Sunday

March 25, 2012

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Let us now look to our great Savior and His Word—Psalm 23.

Thank You, Lord. We worship You, our great Savior. Thank You that Your work is perfect. “Lifted up were You to die; ‘It is finished,’ was Your cry” (Man of Sorrows, P. Bliss). It is finished. You have fully atoned for sin. Freedom in full has been regained for those who trust in You. The ransom has been paid. The door has been opened. The Father welcomes all Your sheep into His eternal house. Good Shepherd—the Lamb who laid down His life for the sheep—open our eyes that we may see Your glory. Open our ears to hear Your voice afresh. Lord Jesus we pray that You would make our hearts tender; that we would gladly follow in the path You have set before us. Keep our eyes fixed on You every step of the way. Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in Your sight. We ask for a rich outpouring of Your Holy Spirit to accompany the ministry of Your Word now. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Hear the Word of God from Psalm 23, a psalm of David:

<sup>1</sup> *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

<sup>2</sup> *He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.*

<sup>3</sup> *He restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.*

<sup>4</sup> *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.*

<sup>5</sup> *You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.*

<sup>6</sup> *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,*

*and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever.*

Thanks be to God for His living and eternally abiding Word. Amen.

This past Tuesday morning Pastor Dan Huff and I had the privilege of visiting our dear 99-year-old sister in Christ, Vernell Schuelke, less than twenty-four hours before she departed this world to be with Jesus. We rejoice that she is with Him now. She could no longer speak to us but her nurses assured us she could hear. What better words could we leave her with than these words from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm? Words that I am sure she had known from her childhood when she began following Jesus; words that Spurgeon said have been a dying pillow to thousands of the saints of God: "They have laid their heads down on it and they have passed into the Glory with calmness and assurance and confidence."

When we finished reading, we sang to her, "It is Well With My Soul." It seemed to us that her face responded with recognition and affirmation of the truth of the gospel midway through that hymn. How reassuring it was for us to know that when she walked through the valley of the shadow of death, she walked through it and didn't get lost in it. She came to the other side. How comforting to know that all day Tuesday and Wednesday morning, she only saw the shadow of death lingering over her. We know the shadow of a serpent cannot sting. The shadow of a dog cannot bite. The shadow of a sword cannot kill. Wherever there is a shadow, there must be a light somewhere to cast it.

If you believe in Jesus as Vernell did, death is only a shadow. Behind that fearful shadow there is a bright light shining—the light of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter and every Sunday, and that resurrection turns the Grim Reaper of Death into a servant who ushers us who believe in Jesus into His glorious presence forever. Dan and I were thankful that when we left Central DuPage Hospital, we were not leaving Vernell alone. We could not walk with her where she needed to go but her Great Shepherd was with her. He led her along paths of righteousness into the house of the Lord where she will now dwell forever. Now Vernell is safely at home with her Shepherd, seeing Him face-to-face for the first time.

Do you have a Shepherd this morning? Do you know His Name? The Psalm does not say, "There is a Shepherd." The Psalm says, "*The Lord.*" That's His specific name—Yahweh—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God of the Bible. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. It does not say, "Whatever god you

choose to believe in—whomever you look to for your higher power—will shepherd you when you need him.” No, it says, “*the Lord*” specifically. The one true and living God. The Way, the Truth and the Life. The Lord Jesus Christ is my Shepherd. Do you know Him this morning? Do you have a Shepherd you can trust to lead you through the Valley of the Shadow of Death? Are you confident He is yours and you are His? I am His and He is mine.

I heard about a young girl who was trying to quote Psalm 23. She began like this: “The LORD is my Shepherd; that’s all I want.” She got the words wrong but she got the thought of it just right. If you have the Lord Jesus Himself as your Shepherd, you really have all you need to make it joyfully through this life and safely into the next. Everything else on top of Jesus is just a luxury. It is why the old Puritan could look at a simple meal of a boiled potato and a glass of water and could gratefully exclaim, “All this and Jesus Christ, too!” When we have Him, we have the greatest treasure in the world.

Do you have Jesus as your Shepherd? Do you have Jesus as your personal, resourceful, thoughtful, dependable, watchful Shepherd caring for your soul all the days of your life? Can you say, “*The Lord [Jesus Christ], is my Shepherd; [I shall lack nothing] I shall not want?*”

We are now going to focus on the last two verses of this psalm. I think it is important that we spend ample time reflecting on this very familiar psalm because as sweet as this psalm is, it is not sentimental. It is not something that fits easily into a Precious Moments museum. The scene is serene in places, but it is not only serene. There is danger that surrounds this psalm. There is danger lurking on the horizon as David writes this psalm. The danger is what I want us to consider now. To be a sheep in this world is to be pursued by dangerous enemies. There are wolves seeking to devour the sheep. There are ravens hovering overhead.

I read of one shepherd in the Scottish Highlands. They were close to the sea and he described that whenever hooded crows or black-backed sea gulls would circle overhead, he would run to protect his endangered sheep. The hooded crows would swoop down and quickly pluck out a sheep’s eyes, leaving her blind. Those huge black-backed sea gulls were known to go straight into the sheep’s ribs for her liver. Now that is a graphic and grotesque illustration but I use it purposefully because the truth is, we have enemies like this. They are fierce. You and I do not know—nor could we know—how fierce the enemies of our souls are or how endangered we are everyday.

Romans 8:36 says, *"For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered"* (here Paul is quoting Psalm 44:22). That is the condition of God's people in this world. To be a Christian—to be a sheep in Christ's flock—is to be pursued. It is to be pursued by relentless enemies of your soul. Spiritual warfare is not something that just flares up once in a great while in the Christian life. Spiritual warfare is the daily reality of a Christian's life. You are living in a war and it is even more dangerous if you are not aware or mindful of the battle you are in and the evils you face.

I have two main points about this pursuit of Christ's sheep that I want to make. One is from verse five and one is from verse six.

## 1. A Pursuit You Will Escape (v. 5)

There is a pursuit Christ's sheep will escape. We do not know the enemies of our soul but God does. As our Shepherd, He is committed to protecting, defending and delivering us from all the enemies of our souls. The moment we enter into the flock of God, these enemies start pursuing us. They start seeking to devour and destroy us. We can divide these enemies up into three basic divisions, companies or battalions of evil forces arrayed against the saints. There's the world, the flesh and the devil.

- **The world** and its godlessness, secularism, self-centered and pleasure-seeking lifestyle are—and always will be—enemies to the people of God. Listen to James 4:4, *"Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."* Then 1 John 2:15, *"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."* This world—from the Fall onward—has been in opposition to God. Though it is subtle, the world's values seek to lure us away from the safety of Christ's pasture into the dangerous fields of its pleasures. The world seeks to destroy Christ's sheep.
- Then there is **the flesh**. The flesh is the enemy within us. It is our sinful nature and the passions within us that Peter says, *"...wage war against your soul"* (1 Peter 2:11). The flesh is never going to become the friend of God. Our flesh and sinful nature will always be in opposition to God until the moment we die. It is never going to be improved. God is not into the work of renovating our flesh. Our flesh is always opposed to God. It is only through the work of the Holy Spirit in us making a new creation that we can live in fellowship with God.

- Then **the devil** himself is an enemy of Christ's sheep. Listen to 1 Peter 5:8-9, "*Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith...*"

We have enemies who will never tell us the truth. Nor will they ever tell the truth about us. They are enemies who will try to skew our motives, ravage our pastures, muddy our waters, plant deceptive signs along our paths of righteousness and oppress—not restore—our souls. These enemies are pursuing us—but God knows them. He knows them all. He shepherds us constantly in the midst of our enemies. Verse five says that God is very kind to His sheep in the presence of their enemies.

If you are one of Christ's sheep, you will surely escape the pursuit of your enemies through the kindness of your Shepherd. How does God ensure that the pursuit of your enemies will ultimately fail? His kindness toward us is what keeps us in His fold.

In verse five, David highlights three expressions of God's kindness to His sheep. There are three ways God demonstrates His keeping power for His sheep.

**First**, David says, "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*" Can you picture the scene? Here is a flock of sheep surrounded by lions and bears—but there is the Shepherd, with His rod and His staff. He is keeping all those enemies at bay and His sheep are all gathered safely around Him as He sets a beautiful table in their midst. He puts a tablecloth on it, puts out all the fine china and He prepares a sumptuous feast for His sheep. He says, "Sit down here in the presence of your enemies and I will feed your souls. I will strengthen and nourish you."

"*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*" This is David's answer to a question God's people asked when they were wandering in the wilderness. Psalm 78:19 records this question, "*They spoke against God, saying, 'Can God spread a table in the wilderness?'*" They were asking, "Can God take care of us here? Can He meet our needs?" David says, "Not only can God spread a table in the wilderness, He can spread a table for you in the midst of the fiercest battle when the beasts of prey are surrounding you." He will do it in such a way that He makes them tremble and His people be at peace. That is how He kindly cares for His sheep.

Now can you imagine a soldier in the midst of the battle—right in the midst of the fierce warfare—sitting down in the presence of his enemies at a table and feasting? It is unthinkable! At best, you are going to grab the food and go. You are going to be on the

move and hurried. You cannot rest and eat in peace—but the Lord our Shepherd is a gracious and generous host. Because He is our Strong Defender, there is nothing to fear. Nothing is hurried.

We have experienced this. We have been wearied and pressured in the battles of this life. Sometimes we do not know how we are going to take another step. That is when God comes and says, “Here, sit down. I’ve got a feast for you. I’ve prepared a table for you. Eat and be satisfied.”

The closest parallel to this that I can think of in the new covenant is the Lord’s Table. Have you ever thought about what an amazingly strengthening feast the Lord’s Table is for God’s people? Have you ever considered that when we come to feast at the Table of the Lord, the enemies of our soul are all held at bay and they watch as our Savior strengthens us? It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace. As He feeds us at His table, we walk away refreshed. We walk away in the midst of the battle stronger than we have ever been before and our enemies look on with terror because they know we have a Shepherd meeting our needs. *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”*

The **second** expression of God’s kindness that David mentions is the anointing. He says, *“You anoint my head with oil.”* Now in the Middle East, if you went to someone’s house for a meal, there were two expressions of hospitality to say, “You are welcome here.” They would wash your feet and then they would anoint your head to refresh you from the heat of the day. The anointing is a sign of welcoming, hospitality, joy and acceptance.

It is also a sign of consecration and being set apart unto God for His purposes. When someone became a priest in the Old Testament, the anointing oil would be poured on his head as if to say, “This one is set apart to serve Me. He belongs to Me. I guarantee My presence will go with him, I will enable him to fulfill his calling and I will promise my protection to him as he walks in obedience to Me.” God would anoint priests and kings with oil poured on their heads in order to symbolize His presence with them.

Sheep also experience this anointing regularly. Even today, shepherds dip sheep in this oily solution to keep the fleas and flies away. The insects especially like to gather around the sheep’s head and nose. I cannot bear even to think about it. It drives the sheep crazy so the shepherds have to dip their sheep in oil to ward off these pests. In Bible times, every few days the shepherds would take their sheep’s horns and heads, pour oil on them and rub it in to protect them.

What do I think of when I think of God's anointing? I think of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. I think of what it means for a believer to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, to be dipped into His gracious influence, to be covered and have the Holy Spirit poured out upon our lives. We need the Holy Spirit's presence repeatedly. This relationship we have with the Holy Spirit needs to be constant and ongoing. It is not just something that happens to us when we first believe and then we forget about it.

No, the Holy Spirit is our anointing oil that we need to refresh us continually lest the heat and the dangers of the journey weary us and cause us to fall. I need the Holy Spirit and all the grace of God available to me in the Holy Spirit today. I need His power in my life to protect me from the power of indwelling sin. I need this anointing from Him so that He can teach me the ways of my God and Shepherd.

It is through the work of the Spirit in and on me that I am enabled to fight and resist this enemy within. Galatians 5:16 says, "*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*" That is how we escape from the temptations of the flesh. It is through the workings of God's Holy Spirit on our lives, leading us into those green pastures and beside those still waters. "*You anoint my head with oil.*"

The **third** expression of God's kindness that David mentions is this overflowing cup. "*My cup overflows.*" Here you are at the table and the enemies are all around. The Shepherd prepares the feast and pours on the anointing oil. Then He fills the chalice with sweet wine. He does not just fill it a little bit; He fills it until it is overflowing—so full of blessing it can hold no more. This is the antidote to worldliness and the love of this world. The antidote is to drink deeply from the wells of salvation and the glories of Calvary—to let these truths so satisfy and thrill your soul that you say in the words of the hymn that my Grandma loves to sing:

All that thrills my soul is Jesus,  
He is more than life to me;  
And the fairest of ten thousand  
In my blessed Lord I see.

(“All That Thrills My Soul” by Thoro Harris)

If you drink from this sweet cup of blessing, you remember that the only reason you can drink from it is because your Savior drank from the bitter cup of God's wrath. This is the same cup He looked into in the Garden of Gethsemane with dread and horror and said, "*My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*" (Matthew 26:39). As the Father put that cup filled with the dregs of sin and judgment

up to our Savior's lips, He drank it down to the very last drop. He drank it bone dry so that we do not have to drink of the cup of wrath but can drink instead of the cup overflowing with blessing.

Joni Eareckson Tada points out here that, "When something overflows, we usually think of waste. Water that overflows a dam rushes out to sea. Gas that overflows a tank pollutes the ground..." I don't know if you have ever done that. The automatic stopper on the gas nozzle did not work and you turned around to find gas flowing out of your car. It is not a good thing! "Coffee that overflows a cup stains the carpet." I experienced this next one recently, "Milk that overflows a measuring cup drains down the sink. Most folk tend to equate 'overflow' with 'waste' or 'squandered resource.' But what about a life that overflows? What about a man or woman who brims over with the joy and grace and love of God? Is it all down the drain?" Is that a waste?

No, far from it! We overflow with God's blessings as an expression of His unfailing love and care for us. Joni goes on to say, "God doesn't intend your life to overflow down the storm drain or evaporate into the air. He wants it to soak others! The spillover of His love and goodness in our lives is to benefit and encourage those around us."

As we drink from that overflowing cup, it is so we can say to other people, "Look at my Savior! Look at how satisfied my soul is in Jesus. Come and drink with me and be filled with our Savior's goodness."

Taste the goodness of the Lord:  
welcomed home to his embrace  
all his love as blood outpoured  
seals the pardon of his grace.

Can I doubt his love for me,  
when I trace that love's design?  
By the cross of Calvary  
I am his and he is mine.

("Loved with Everlasting Love" by George W. Robinson)

As this truth starts to sweeten and influence our lives and we overflow with the blessings of our salvation, it is then we can share that salvation with others.

Friends, verse five is how your Good Shepherd protects you from the pursuit of your enemies. He protects you so well by lavishing kindness on you. This is how the Shepherd keeps His sheep in the fold—He makes them so satisfied with His goodness that they do not want to go somewhere else. They delight in Him, love Him, enjoy Him and have pleasure in

His fellowship. That is how He keeps us in the palm of His hand so that no one and nothing can snatch us away (John 10:29). He keeps us with His kindness.

I want you to notice this is an “either/or” thing here in verse five. Either you are feasting at the table of the Lord or you are out among the wolves. Either you are being drenched in the Holy Spirit or you are under the control of your sinful nature. Either you are drinking of the cup of blessing or you are getting drunk on the intoxicating pleasures of this world. There are only two places to be—either under the care of your Shepherd or out in the ways of the world, exposed and vulnerable. If you are not in the flock with Christ's sheep, you need to recognize you are in a very vulnerable place. The only place of safety is at His table, under the control of His Spirit, drinking in the cup of gospel blessings.

That is verse five—a pursuit God's sheep will escape because of the kindness of their Shepherd. The pursuit of the enemies will be thwarted.

## 2. A Pursuit You Cannot Escape (v. 6)

Look at verse six where we see a contrast. Your enemies will pursue you but if you are one of Christ's sheep, they will not be able to overtake you. However, in verse six we hear of another pursuit—a pursuit Christ's sheep cannot escape. *“Surely [this is absolutely certain] goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*

Imagine yourself walking in the darkest valley. The shadow of death is looming. It is a scary place to be. The world, the flesh and the devil all seem ominously near and very close. Suddenly, you hear footsteps. You say to your friend, “Someone's following us! We're being followed!” And your friend turns to you with a smile and says, “Oh, don't worry. That's only goodness and mercy following us.”

What keeps following you in the dark if you are one of Christ's sheep? It is only goodness and mercy following you and they will bring you safely home. Fear not. Goodness is God giving us what we do not deserve. His goodness supplies our needs, even though we do not deserve it. Mercy is God not giving us what we do deserve, forgiving us our sins, blotting them out and coming to us despite our sin.

An old Scottish elder was preaching on one occasion and he said very wonderfully:

“What do I think of when I think of goodness and mercy? I think of the fellows taking the sheep home, walking down the road with their sticks. The sheep are coming behind them and behind the sheep are the two dogs. One is called Goodness and the other is called Mercy. You watch them. Sheep

being what they are when the shepherd's back is turned, they will try and sneak off the road. You see a sheep on one side and off it goes trying to get back to the pasture and the mountains without even the shepherd whistling/ What happens? Goodness runs out and circles the sheep and turns it back into the flock and into the path of God. Then a little further along the road another one will do the same or two or three will do it and there you will see Mercy running out and turning the sheep back too. Ah they are two lovely sheepdogs, Goodness and Mercy."

Goodness and Mercy—two lovely sheepdogs. How often I have strayed from my Shepherd's path. It has never been long before I heard old Goodness coming and barking at my heels. "Come on David! Get back on track." Or Mercy, with her sweet and tender appeal, "Come back, come back!" They do not let us get far before these lovely sheepdogs return the sheep to the fold. They follow us all the days of our lives.

The word follow is actually a very strong word. Something can follow you and it eventually lags behind without being able to keep up, as my dog does when we run together. He follows for a little while but then I am dragging him along. The word here is not that kind of follow. It is a strong word that means "to chase" or "to pursue." One paraphrase puts it like this, *"Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life."* Wherever the Good Shepherd takes His flock, His faithful sheepdogs—Goodness and Mercy—are chasing after and pursuing them. They will not let the sheep out of their sight.

I want you to notice carefully the order here. The Shepherd goes first, then the sheep, then the sheepdogs follow from behind. What do the sheep need to do? They need to keep their eyes on the Shepherd. Sometimes the sheep get confused and start looking around for Goodness and Mercy and if they cannot see Goodness and Mercy, they wonder, "Is the Shepherd really before me?"

That is the wrong order. The right order is keep your eyes on the Shepherd, then Goodness and Mercy will follow right behind you. You can trust that they will never lose sight of you. You keep your eyes on Him and keep looking at your Shepherd. You cannot escape the pursuit of Goodness and Mercy. In fact, if you are one of Christ's sheep, the story of your life 40 or 80 years from now is not going to be the story of all you have accomplished for God. It is going to be the story of all that God—through His goodness and mercy—has accomplished for and through you for His name's sake.

Then after all the days of your life are over, what do you have to look forward to? *"And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever!"* There is no separation or parting from there. Iain Campbell said:

"The promise of the covenant is that God is with His people here; but the prospect of the covenant is that we will be with Him there... The glory of the gospel is that Jesus came from heaven to earth; but the hope of the gospel is that He will bring His people from earth to heaven."

When He finally gets us into His house, He will shut the door, He will keep us in His own house forever and He will keep His enemies out forever. There is nothing more important for you to know which side of that door you will be on when the Shepherd closes the door. Will you be inside the Shepherd's house or will you be on the outside? Only those who can say now, *"The Lord is my Shepherd,"* will be able to say then, *"And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*

Then finally, in His house, the Shepherd—Whose back we have been seeing all along as we followed Him—will turn around and we will see His face! We will gaze upon the face of our Lord. He will be Heaven's chief attraction and He will turn and welcome us into His Father's house.

Friends, you are being pursued all your life long. The question is what will overtake you in the end? Will it be the world, the flesh and the devil? Will the enemies of your soul destroy you? Or will goodness and mercy overtake you? It all hinges on whether or not you can say, *"The LORD [Jesus Christ] is my Shepherd."* If you want to go to Heaven with Christ when you die, you need to follow Him as your Shepherd while you live.

There is an old Christian myth which I do not know if it is true but it makes a good point. It is a story about a group of people who gathered to hear the recitation of Psalm 23. Two people recited that Psalm. First, an experienced actor and secondly, a simple pastor—just a simple, country pastor. When the actor recited the Psalm, it was so eloquent that the people broke into thunderous applause at the end. They were thrilled with the performance. Then the simple pastor got up and as he began to recite, a profound silence settled over the congregation. At the end, there was no response except for the sobbing of a few in the crowd. People asked afterwards, "Why the difference in the response?"

Someone replied, "Well, here's why. The actor knew the Psalm, but the pastor knew the Shepherd." You know the Psalm. The question is, "Do you know the Shepherd?"

Let's pray. Father, I pray You would so work by Your grace, through Your Holy Spirit, in every heart in this place that no one would leave here today without really knowing that they go into the world facing all of these enemies with You as their Shepherd. Lord, we are very vulnerable in this world without You but we thank You that we are safe if You are our Shepherd. So open the eyes of everyone here to see the glory of Your Son and may we all put our trust and hope in Jesus. We ask this in His name, Amen.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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