

Trust the Shepherd

Psalm 23

Series: Key Texts for Difficult Times

Introduction: Please take your Bible and join me in Psalm 23. In the minutes ahead of us we are going to explore the truths presented in one of the most cherished and most well-known texts in all of holy Scripture. It is a text which has been put to memory by God's people the most often. It is a text which has spurred more songs for the Christian hymnbook than any other. It is a text which has comforted the dying, restored the wayward, given healing balm to the spiritually sick, lavished blessed truth on the widow and the orphan, and been the bedrock of many a saint through the course of life. And so, with fear and trembling we come to this sacred ground of God's holy Word.

This is a text that is so well known and so often rehearsed that the depth of its power to help us might be missed because it has become so cliché. But, as we face the unique challenges of our present crisis, it is just like text like this that we need the most. So, we have taken a break from our series in Deuteronomy to take the next 7 weeks to cover key texts for difficult times. What are the portions of Scripture that contain the clear statements of truth we need the most when our worlds get turned upside down, our rhythms get interrupted, our plans get destroyed, and our futures become as solid as quicksand? Well, the options are seemingly endless, but we'll limit ourselves to 7 that provide the concentrated medicine for our needy souls for such a time as this. We started last week with Christ's words in Matthew 6 – Do not be anxious but seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. Today, we turn to the crowning jewel of the hymnbook of the Old Testament – Psalm 23. *Read Psalm 23.*

This song of David expresses a deep and abiding personal trust in God. The kind of trust that is completely necessary for every saint in every moment of life, especially the hardest moments. Notice how the psalm starts with the statement of who God is and it ends with the glorious hope of living forever with God in His house. In other words, David's great hope – his solid rock for all of life – his greatest joy and his surpassing comfort – was not a change in his circumstances or a cure to all that ails him. Rather, his great hope is the Lord, who is his shepherd. When David uses the title the "LORD" you know he is using the most personal and glorious names for God in our Bibles. The name literally means, "I am who I am." It is a name which communicates the self-sufficiency of God. He exists of his own accord and by his own power and for his own purposes. He is the only entity about which this is true. There is nothing else that is completely self-sufficient. He is the purely self-sufficient one – He is the "I am who I am." He needs nothing from anyone. He is accountable to no one. He requires nothing to maintain who He has always been and who he will always be.

And David says – this self-sufficient Lord over all is my shepherd. This is the most personal and intimate description David has used so far in the Psalms for his relationship with God. And if one must be shepherded through all of life, then what better shepherd to choose than the all-sufficient God? And how completely condescending of the self-sufficient God to take upon himself the task of being the shepherd of his people? This is not a mere honorary title by the way. In the original the word for shepherd is a verbal noun, a participle, which means that God is a shepherd because he shepherds his people. This is not an empty title of what David hopes God will be for him, but a descriptive title of what God is doing. He is shepherding.

And this word picture of God as shepherd is an astounding one. He is willingly taking up the mantle of the most basic, entry level and high demand jobs ever known to mankind – that of a shepherd to sheep. It is a job that has endless requirements and was usually reserved for the lowest and youngest member of the family – like David in his early days. The flock of sheep were completely dependent upon their shepherd. They needed constant attention, care, protection, and direction. And the Lord willingly takes that role for his people – who like sheep are completely helpless, aimless, and defenseless.

And David says, because that is true – because the Lord is his shepherd – he shall not want – or he will have no lack. He will have all that he needs. He will be sufficiently and adequately supplied for in every way. And this cannot be the result unless the first part of the equation is in place. It is only because the Lord is David's shepherd that he can say, I shall not want. If we have the Lord as our shepherd, then we have all that we need – he will truly prove to be our all in all. But if you don't have the Lord as your shepherd then you will be in constant need. The wicked always way, says Spurgeon, but the righteous never! The rest of the psalm then explains what it means to have no lack throughout the course of life. David describes the path that the shepherd asks us to walk as his sheep. He leads us to food and water, he corrects us when we stray, he leads us in the right path, he comforts us in the darkest parts, he abundantly supplies in the face of great threats, and he ultimately leads us safely home to dwell with Him forever. And all along the way the Good Shepherd is providing for us in completely sufficient ways.

But this can only be true if you are a true sheep of the Lord's. He is taking personal responsibility for his flock, and only for his flock. They are his sheep and he is their shepherd. The promises of verses 2-6 can only be true for you if you are really and truly in the flock of God. Have you heard the voice of the Good Shepherd calling out to you and calling you to leave the broad and smooth way that leads to destruction and to come to him by grace through faith? Have you left all other hopes, all other masters, all other shepherds and come to be a part of his flock? Have you entered through the one door to the sheepfold, who is Christ Jesus our Lord, and entered into the one flock of this one true shepherd? It is not by accident that this psalm follows Psalm 22. In Psalm 22 we see the prophetic words about the suffering of the Messiah on behalf of his people. He will one day cry out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" And he will do this as the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. He was accursed in the place of his sheep so that they could know him as their shepherd. The cry of the accursed must precede the song of praise and full trust in Psalm 23. If you are in God's flock through faith in His Son, then

the promises of this psalm are your greatest joy in life. You will never lack. And specifically, in this verse 2 we see that you will have sufficient peace if the Lord is your shepherd.

1. Sufficient Peace – vs. 2

- a. The psalmist says that the Lord makes him to lie down in green pastures and he leads him beside still waters. The green pastures are those which have ample supply of food which when the sheep have adequately fed upon, they can then lay down for a rest. Professional shepherds, like Philip Keller in his classic book “A Shepherd’s Look at the 23rd Psalm – tell us that sheep are incredibly fearful animals. They are easily spooked and are quite temperamental. They will not lay down for rest, according to Keller, unless four things are absent. There must not be any present danger which would cause them to fear. There must not be any friction in the flock – any social discord. There must not be any flies or parasites irritating them. And there must not be any feeling of needing to find food. So, the shepherd cannot just lead the flock to some grassy plain and hope it all turns out okay. No, he must work to create the perfect environment for their rest. They must be free of fear and friction and flies and famine. And only the shepherd could provide this peaceful situation based upon the sheep’s great trust of his care for them.
- b. They are also led to the still waters. Sheep will not drink from fast flowing water, and so the shepherd guides them to the perfect spot for them to have their thirst quenched. Notice that they are not driven to the place of satisfaction, but they are led. And the place of satisfaction is a place of peace and rest. The absence of difficulty and trouble for the sheep allow for their nourishment and growth so that they become prize members of his wonderful flock. This word picture carries over to the Christian as we are made to lie down in the grassy meadow of God’s Word. As sheep, the grass we eat is the Word of God and the water we drink is the grace of God, given to us in Christ. He is the bread of life and he is the spring of living water. And the sheep must continually feast upon Christ. And this great feast is the place of perfect rest and sufficient peace. Having figurative bellies full of the sustaining grace of God we can truly lie down in rest-filled faith in His good shepherding care.

2. Sufficient Direction – vs. 3

- a. As sheep of the Good Shepherd we also know his sufficient direction in verse 3. This is part of his constant care which never fails or falters. He restores our soul and he leads us in paths of righteousness. This is the negative and positive side of repentance. This is the shepherd keeping the sheep from further damage by restoring and returning him from his wayward tendencies. And this is the shepherd directing the sheep in the right and good and safe path. Unlike most other animals, sheep have a complete lack of direction. They don’t have an internal Google Maps, and so they need the constant and careful direction from their shepherd. Being prone to wander off and being easily led astray from even the most familiar environment – they must be constantly watched. They are also prone to being cast onto their backs with no way to recover without help. Philip

Keller describes the scene of them resting in the green pastures described in verse 2. And as they lay down, they might turn to their side a bit to stretch out their legs and then their body weight might carry them a bit further than they were planning – they kick their legs to recover, which only makes it worse – and soon they are laying on their backs – feet flailing in the air with no way to rescue themselves. If the shepherd doesn't come soon in response to their helpless bleating, then they will die in their capsized state.

- b. But a good shepherd is constantly watching for this reality and he comes and restores the sheep to its feet and leads it onward in the right direction. Psalm 19:7 uses this word for restore to describe what the Word of God does to our soul. So, the shepherding work of God to restore us is done through the means of his Word. His truth, as it were, are the hands of the shepherd reaching down to roll us back over onto our feet so that we might continue on the right path. This restoration of soul produces in the sheep a longing for more instruction in the paths of righteousness. Having had the sour experience of being cast on his back or having wandered from the flock, the true sheep is looking for the Shepherd to carefully and skillfully guide him in the ways of righteousness.
 - c. And all of this constant care and corrective work of the shepherd is done for his own name's sake. The flock are the surest and most obvious expression of the skill and care of the Shepherd. You can know a Shepherd by the health of his flock. And surely, the Lord's name is attached to the Lord's flock. And so, his restoring and directing work in the lives of his sheep is for his own name's sake. His own glory and honor and reputation are at stake in the health of his flock. This word "for" is an emphatic expression of purpose. It is used by Joseph in Genesis 50:20 when he is telling his brothers that though they meant all of these things for evil against him, God meant it for good. And then he defines the good by saying – to bring it about that many people would be saved in the famine. In other words, Joseph knew that God's shepherding of his life – though it led him through some very dark tunnels and difficulties – was to bring about the purposes of accomplishing God's plan, and this ultimately would bring glory and honor to the Shepherd. And David says – because the Lord is my shepherd, I have sufficient direction which is to the end of the Shepherd being honored. He restores and he guides – therefore he deserves the credit.
- 3. Sufficient Protection – vs. 4**
- a. With the Lord as our shepherd, we also see that we have sufficient protection in verse 4. And here we come to perhaps the most famous verse of this most famous psalm. "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." Sometimes the good leading of this good shepherd will take the flock into dangerous places. As the flock travelled from one mountain meadow to another, they would pass through valleys between mountains that were filled with dark shadows, and hence great danger for the sheep. It would be here in the shadows that their predators – the lions and the bears – would lurk and wait for an unsuspecting sheep to wander from the flock and become an easy target.

- b. The “shadow of death” is one compound word in the Hebrew and it is the strongest word possible for darkness. This is a deep darkness which is fraught with danger for the sheep. But David says that he will fear no evil – even in this deepest darkness of this dangerous path. How is it that he can say such a thing?
- c. Because his shepherd is present, and his shepherd will protect him. Notice how in verse 4 the pronoun shifts from “he” in verses 1-3 to “you” in verse 4. It is here in the deep darkness and all that it threatens that the sheep are the most aware of the Shepherd’s presence. It is here that they look to see that he is around, that he is present, that he is with them. And His presence is enough for them. They are such trusting animals that they will follow the shepherd into the darkest valley as long as he is with them. They know he is good, and they know that he can be trusted.
- d. As a shepherd David knew the tools of the trade – the rod and the staff. And so, he says here that he knows the Lord will use the rod and the staff as needed to keep him safe in the darkest valley. The rod was a club like piece of wood that would be used to beat off predators, and the staff was long stick with the crook in the end that would guide the sheep in the right direction through the dark valley. Therefore, the sheep can follow the shepherd one trust-filled step at a time down this dark and unknown corridor.
- e. The reason this verse has been so comforting to so many as they have entered into their final moments of life on this earth is because of how it is described here. True sheep of the Lord walk through the valley of the shadow of death. If you are in Christ by grace through faith, then your death is not real dying, but rather it is the front porch to the house of eternal life. That is why the Spirit of God here calls it the shadow of death. No one is stopped or hindered by a shadow. The shadow of a dog never bit anyone. The shadow of a building never harmed anyone. And a shadow is produced by a light source which shines behind and beyond the shadow. So, the passing through the shadow brings you out into the light. And that is what the text describes. The sheep pass through this valley, they don’t stay in it. So, there is no substance to the valley – it is not the valley of death, but the valley of the shadow of death. And there is no permanence to it because we pass through it to true and lasting and eternal life on the other side if we are in Christ.
- f. “After the funeral service of his first wife, the late Donald Grey Barnhouse, distinguished pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, was thinking about how he could convey to his young children the loss of their mother. As he tried to conjure up words of comfort, the shadow of a large van passed over their car as they were driving down the highway. Instantly, Barnhouse thought of the words needed for the moment. ‘Children,’ he asked, ‘would you rather be run over by a truck, or by its shadow?’ The children quickly answered, ‘Well, of course, Dad, we’d much rather be run over by its shadow! The shadow cannot hurt us.’
- g. Then Barnhouse, the master illustrator, replied, ‘The truck of death ran over the Lord Jesus two thousand years ago so that only its shadow now passes over us.

That is all that has happened to your mother. Only the shadow of death has passed over her. She is unharmed in heaven.”¹

- h. Beloved, the Great Shepherd has faced the great enemy of death and has completely overcome so that we need no longer fear. We can say like Paul that to die is gain because it is far better to depart and be with the Lord. So even in facing down mankind’s greatest enemy – that of death – the true Christian can say – I will fear no evil!
- 4. Sufficient Provision – vs. 5**
- a. This would be enough, wouldn’t it? This good shepherd gives us sufficient peace, and sufficient direction, and sufficient protection. But there is more! Verse 5 describes the sufficient provision given by this Divine Shepherd. Some commentators think that David changes the word picture here from a shepherd to that of a host of a great feast. Others think that the shepherding metaphor continues, and this is the shepherd leading the sheep into the tablelands of abundant grass that he has gone ahead of them to clear of any danger or poisonous plant. Both are possible, but the main point remains. The Lord blesses his people with sufficient provision. The picture in verse 5 is that of an abundant feast with a table full of food and with a cup that is always full and with a head that is anointed with fresh oil. The sheep is the honored guest and is bountifully supplied.
 - b. This feast takes place in the presence of our enemies. This most likely signifies the conquering of the enemies and the victory celebration happening before them. That is the totality of the Christian life. We are more than conquerors if we are Christ’s and we can never be separated from his love, Romans 8 says. So, we constantly well supplied in the face of our enemies by our ever-conquering Lord. The sheep are in perfect peace even as the battle rages around them because they are in the ever conquering arms of the Chief Shepherd!
 - c. But just because this is true doesn’t mean this is valued and trusted and delighted in by the sheep. How many a sheep have had an overflowing cup and a worrisome heart? How many sheep have had an abundance of present provision but who are focused on the lack of future provision? David is determining here in verse 5 that whatever his current lot in life, he knows that his cup truly runs over. This is the secret of contentment – that if you have Christ you have all that you need!
- 5. Sufficient Hope – vs. 6**
- a. Then David finishes his description of the Lord as his shepherd by describing the sufficient hope he has in verse 6. As God’s sheep he is completely helpless and dependent, and this is a wonderful position to be in because of the great promises of the Shepherd. Specifically, in verse 6 there is a promise for the journey of life, and there is a promise for the end of life. For the journey we can be sure that goodness and mercy will follow us every day. And for the end of life we can be assured that we will dwell with the Lord in His house forever and ever.

¹ Steven J. Lawson, *Holman Old Testament Commentary: Psalms 1-75*, pg. 124.

- b. For the journey – we are promised goodness and mercy. The goodness of the Lord is a catch all description of everything about him. It's a description of quality of the blessing that God's sheep enjoy because they are under his care. It is not just good in the comparison to good, better, best. This is not the lowest quality on the totem pole. No, this is a rich word of abundant blessing and kind providence. This is the complete opposite of evil and bad. Everything the Lord does as the shepherd of his people is good. And it is this goodness of the Lord which follows the believer every day of their life.
- c. That goodness is coupled with lovingkindness, or mercy – hesed in the Hebrew. This is the covenantal love of God. It is a word related to a word for bending down. This is the condescending love of God in which he bends over to provide constant care for his sheep because he loves them. This is then a power-packed duo of God's constant care and love. And David says that they follow him all the days of his life. Better than that, the word for follow should be translated as pursue. So, to stick with the sheep imagery here, goodness and mercy are like the sheepdogs that are always on the heels of the sheep. They pursue every last sheep and they love to pour out their rich supply at every turn.
- d. Spurgeon describes them as the handmaidens who are always dotting on those loved by the Lord. The Christian is never without the goodness and mercy of God. Do you believe that Christian? Can you take God at His Word here? Can you trust that even in those bitter experiences – those dark valleys of the shadow of death – that even there, goodness and mercy are on your heels, serving and blessing you at every step?
- e. Allen Gardiner was a 19th Century missionary from England to the islands off the southern coast of South America. As a pioneer missionary his efforts were not very successful and his team all died of starvation, one by one. When the ship bringing their next round of supplies finally showed up, they found all the men dead. They buried the bodies and took Gardiner's journal with them. In that journal they found the record of hunger and thirst and wounds and deep loneliness. But the last entry, written by an obviously weak and shaky hand said, "I am overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God." That is the promise of God to His sheep – even the darkest and most difficult parts of the path will be filled with the goodness and mercy of God.
- f. And when the days of life are over, the promise at the end of the journey is far greater than anything promised along the way. The last breath in this life will give way to the first breath in the blessed and glorious house of our Great Shepherd. Temporal blessings of goodness and mercy will give way to the great joy of God's eternal presence where true and complete shalom will be found – the fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore!

Conclusion: If you can truly and fully sing this song, then beloved, there is no greater comfort in difficult times. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want! But if the Lord is not your shepherd then you have no true and lasting comfort in this life or the next. Look to the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep and see in Him your only hope for true and lasting life!