

**Westgate Church**

*Walking with God in the Meantime:  
The Christian Life through the Lens of the Psalms*

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## **If You Have the Shepherd, You Have Everything**

### Psalm 23

If you're just joining us this summer, welcome. We are partway through a series entitled, "Walking with God in the Meantime: The Christian Life through the Lens of the Psalms." The Psalms are probably some of the more familiar material in the Bible—a collection of songs and hymns about walking with God in a world where things don't always work the way they're supposed to. And this morning we are looking at what is without question the most familiar chapter in the book: the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the great Shepherd Psalm.

It is nothing short of remarkable how these simple lines have captured the imagination of not only the faithful, but the faithless as well (if you will—those with no interest in or commitment to the God this psalm describes). Not only is it a personal favorite of many Christians, anytime a funeral is depicted in film or television, you can almost guarantee you'll hear this psalm (of course, that's because it's commonly read at real funerals as well). These lines have been reshaped into hymns, set to all kinds of music, and even sampled in pop music from Pink Floyd to Coolio. And so you have to ask, What is it about this psalm that it has generated such an enduring legacy among such a diverse audience? I think there are two things. First, I think it's because this psalm gives testimony to the vulnerability and fear common among all humans—"the valley of the shadow of death." No other phrase captures quite so well the darkness and shrouded mystery of all we fear in life, of evil and death itself. The valley where Death's shadow looms over you as if he's standing right behind you. It's a powerful image. And yet, second, the enduring legacy of this psalm can also be attributed to the adequate solution it supplies to this dreadful valley—that there is a shepherd able to lead us safely through that dark valley, such that we need not be afraid. And his name is Jesus.

There's a certain and not so subtle irony in a psalm that describes God as a shepherd: that means we humans are a lot like sheep. Weak, needy, vulnerable to predators, and perhaps worst of all, prone to wander—away from the shepherd and off on our own. Indeed when Jesus looked out on the people throughout all the cities and villages of Judea, he saw that they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). What happens to sheep with no shepherd? Where will they find water? Who will protect them from danger? How can they find their way home? It's an apt metaphor for life in a world where sin and evil continue to threaten us almost at every turn. From the uncertainty of things we take for granted, like a job or a house or food on the table. To the temptation to plunge ourselves into activities that may satisfy for a moment, but in reality are eating away at our souls and our relationships. To the simple risk of loving someone, knowing in the back of your head that person might take advantage of you, manipulate you, abandon or reject you. The valley of the shadow of death is an apt metaphor for frail humans in a world run amuck by sin.

So we need a shepherd, and that's exactly what Psalm 23 says about God: he is our shepherd, who deserves our trust and who supplies all we need to navigate the fears and dangers of this fallen world.

And yet this phrase, "sheep without a shepherd" does not originate in the Gospels of Matthew or Mark. It was a common phrase in the Old Testament, used to describe the failure of a particular king or leader in how he has ruled his people. Because, the kings in the Old Testament (and even the broader ancient world) were often given the charge to be shepherds of their people. For instance, David was taken from among the flocks (real sheep) to "be shepherd of my people Israel, and . . . prince over Israel" (2 Sam. 5:2). We see this in how God is described elsewhere as well. The opening line of Psalm 80: "Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth." God is a *shepherd* sitting on a *throne*.

So to be a king, was to be a shepherd. They go hand in hand. That's why we see a shift in imagery even in Psalm 23. We start out in the pasture, vv. 1-4 (green pastures and still waters), and we end up in the palace, vv. 5-6, at a victory feast (the anointing oil and overflowing cup). That's because God our King is a Shepherd, who expects his human kings to act like shepherds as well. And when they fail, the people become like sheep without a shepherd, as in 1 Kings 22, when Ahab abdicated his role so that "all Israel [was] scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd" (1 Kgs. 22:17). Or as with the failure of the elders of Israel, when the Lord says through Ezekiel, "my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep" (Ezek. 34:8).

But God is a good shepherd. He's a faithful shepherd. He's a king who takes care of his people, and he does so preeminently by sending his eternal Son, Jesus, to be our Good Shepherd, who lays his life down for the sheep to provide for us, protect us, and bring us safely home. That's actually how this psalm is laid out: a portrait of provision in vv. 1-3, of protection in v. 4, and a portrait of a king who is able to bring us safely home, in vv. 5-6. So first, provision. A good shepherd provides for his sheep, vv. 1-3.

### **A Good Shepherd Provides for his Sheep (vv. 1-3)**

This is a beautiful picture of God's provision. The shepherd supplies everything the sheep needs for life. Food—green pastures. Water—quiet waters. Rest, direction, guidance. The point here and throughout the psalm is that if you have the shepherd, then you have everything. You have all you need. In fact that's really what v. 1 is saying: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" as the old King James puts it. That line, "I shall not want" is actually kind of confusing. It sounds like that if God is my shepherd, I won't want anything, I won't have any desires, perhaps I won't be greedy. But that's not what it means. It means, if God is my shepherd, I will not *lack*, or as the NIV translation puts it, I will not *be in want*. We don't use the word "want" that way very often today, but the idea is that if I have the shepherd, I have all I need; I will not lack anything.

Now, that's what this psalm is saying. But often, our hearts tell us something else, especially as we see that shadow looming. So often when we look at ourselves, left to ourselves, we have great need. Massive need. Again, we are weak and vulnerable and unable to control the even smallest details of our lives—whether or not our heart beats another beat. Whether or not our corporation decides to go through with the lay off. Whether or not that driver runs a red light and smashes into us. We live with the illusion of control, but in reality, we're able to control relatively little. It's not even easy to control our own happiness—our mood goes up and down based on the circumstances and situations of life. We try to compensate for our inadequacies by feeding our happiness, either with food or beer or porn—something that makes us feel like we're in control. Or in our guilt we try to punish ourselves for our inadequacies by refraining from food, or purging after we eat, or cutting ourselves off from relationships. Or we try to escape from our inadequacies with mindless entertainment or fantasies, or hide from them through virtual relationships, online identities.

When it comes down to it, realizing our inadequacies, that we can't even meet our own basic needs, terrifies us. Because it means that we're not in control. And if we're not in control, then we're vulnerable. So, with regard to provision, to our basic needs in life, we ironically retreat inward into a self-dependency, or self-sufficiency: "if it's gonna be, it's up to me." "I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul." "God helps those who help themselves, right?" Rubbish. But we believe it. We put the weight of provision on ourselves, which causes us to close our hearts toward others and close our hands around our possessions, because we need them. Or else we turn outward and become dependent on someone or something else for our needs in life—a co-dependency, if you will. We look to that person to be the shepherd who meets all our needs. We need them and yet we despise them, because they can't do it, and they keep letting us down. They can't bear the weight of the burden. And neither can we.

But ultimately, it's a weight that we weren't designed to bear, and that we need not bear, because God our shepherd-king bears it for us. He is deserves our trust and supplies all we need to navigate the fears and dangers of this fallen world. He reaches into this fallen world and all our failures and insufficiencies and, v. 3, he restores our souls. He revitalizes our lives, giving hope and joy and peace where there was fear and despair. Because, if you have the shepherd, you have all you need. Or to put it another way, *all you need is the shepherd*. He's the one able to lead you to water and food, to guide you and provide for you. If you have the shepherd, you have everything.

But we need to clarify something here. This psalm does *not* depict God as our shepherd and the one who meets our needs *because our needs are the most important thing in the world*. There is a major tendency to think that—that my needs are sovereign, that they're the most important thing in the world and that God exists to meet them. There is a great temptation to approach every relationship, human and divine, in terms of how our needs are met (or left unmet). But God is not merely a divine substitute for our human co-dependency. God our shepherd does not meet our needs for the sake of our needs, but rather, v. 3, "for the sake of his name." "He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." We belong to God. God made us, he made us for his purposes. And his gentle shepherd care for us in our weakness is designed rescue us and restore us to do what he made us to do—to walk in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. To live our lives in such a way that we treat God like God, and bring honor and glory to him.

That our lives make much of him, because he alone is worthy. Now, that perhaps sounds a little egotistical of God to do. But, if he is the best thing there is in the world, then knowing him and delighting in him and making much of him is the best thing he can ask us to do. He can't give us anything better than himself. And so God provides for us and meets our needs that we might honor him with our lives and make much of him by depending on him to be our shepherd.

A good shepherd provides for his sheep. Second, a good shepherd protects his sheep.

### **A Good Shepherd Protects his Sheep (v. 4)**

Again, here we have a breathtaking portrait of God's protection. The very image, as I suggested earlier, that best captures the danger and darkness and evil of this fallen world—"the valley of the shadow of death," is the very thing through which God leads us, such that we need not fear. If you have the shepherd, you don't have to be afraid.

We need to notice two things about this. First, the reason we're told here not to be afraid of the valley is *not* because evil isn't there or isn't real. The picture is terrifying for a reason—because it captures accurately how messed up this world is. It illustrates the terrifying evil of death, of exploitation, of abuse, of neglect. There is in fact much to be afraid of. And again, left to ourselves, we have an ironic tendency then to become self-protective, which doesn't change the fact of our vulnerability one bit. What it does is create again the illusion of control. "I will not be taken advantage of," "I will not be the victim," and so the wall goes up. We do it emotionally: we don't let people in very far because we're afraid they might hurt us, or manipulate us, or disappoint us. We may do it physically: we avoid certain shady characters, certain places, perhaps we become overprotective of ourselves, our stuff, our children. Safety can be wise, but it can also be an idol. But ultimately, we're unable to protect ourselves. We are vulnerable, and the world is evil. The reason we're told not to fear is *not* because evil isn't real, or isn't near.

Rather, second, the reason we're told not to fear is because God is with us, and he is stronger than the evil and darkness. "I will not be afraid, *for you are with me*. Your rod and your staff (those shepherd instruments used for rescuing sheep and beating off the wolves), they comfort me." It's God's presence that makes the difference. If you have the shepherd, you don't have to be afraid. Think about going to a zoo. How foolish is it to stand two feet away from a massive lion. But we do it, and we're not afraid. Not because that lion isn't terrifying or couldn't bite our heads off, but because the glass between us and the lion is stronger than the lion. And so it is with our shepherd who is with us amid the valley of the shadow of death. "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 Jn. 4:4). If you have the shepherd, you don't have to be afraid.

And with the shepherd's protection, we're free to risk living in this fallen world, even to risk loving. We're free to make much of God in how we live out our days. We're even free to go to dangerous places for the sake of the gospel, and maybe even to let our kids go to dangerous places for the sake of the gospel. Because even if this world does its worst to us, and it may, we know that it has already done even worse to Christ, our shepherd, who is with us in the midst of the pain and will be faithful to deliver us out, if not in this world, then into his glorious presence.

For as Jesus says in Luke 12: “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell” (Lk. 12:4-5). If we fear God and trust him with reverence and surrender to him as our shepherd, we don’t have to be afraid. Because not only is our shepherd stronger than the evil of this world, he will be faithful to bring us home. And that’s our final point.

### **A Good Shepherd Brings Home his Sheep (vv. 5-6)**

In v. 5 we now make the transition from pastoral imagery to royal imagery: a great feast of celebration in God’s own house. Verse 5 . . .

If we have the shepherd, we have hope. Hope of victory, and hope of a warm welcome into God’s presence. The imagery here is of a rich banquet, hosted by God our shepherd-king. It’s lavish—a cup that overflows with wine. The anointing with oil—a picture of rejuvenation, as in Psalm 104:15: “wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen [his] heart.” Again, this is a picture of God’s provision. But it’s also a picture of celebration. Notice who’s in the audience for this meal: “you prepare a table before me *in the presence of my enemies.*” Now, if you’re at war, it’s not usually a good idea to sit down to the table and eat if your enemies are right next to you—*unless* they’ve already been conquered. And that’s the picture here—victory over the forces of evil epitomized in the valley of deep darkness.

And yet, when we consider once again our weakness, and specifically our unworthiness, there remains a great temptation to fear. What happens if when we’re brought into the King’s presence, he doesn’t want us. He sends us away. What if he looks on my life, and into my heart, and sees how I have made little of him. How I have replaced him with my wants, my desires, my needs in order to make much of myself? What if he’s heard every careless and cruel word uttered from my mouth? What if he knows how I secretly think I would do a better job deciding what is right and wrong and running this world? What if he has a record of every wrong I’ve ever done in life?

And so we fear rejection. We know we don’t measure up, not before a perfect God. And so we try to clean our lives up. We try to do everything we can to make it up to God, only to find ourselves in one of two places. Either we become *self-righteous*, as though we are good enough, in and of ourselves, we have earned God’s favor and deserve to be welcomed into his presence, not realizing how sinful we really are and how much we need God’s mercy. Or, we become *self-loathing*, able to see only our sin, only our unworthiness, defeated by fear of rejection, and blind to the mercy of God.

And yet the reality is, he does hear every wicked word. He does see the sin in our hands and in our hearts. He does have a record. And no amount of trying harder will ever make it up to him. We deserve his wrath—his holy anger against those who reject him as king in how they think and live. We don’t deserve the banquet table; we deserve the dungeon. We deserve to death’s shadow to fall on us, for we are treasonous and rebellious at heart.

But we have a good shepherd. A good shepherd who is able to bring us safely home to God. And he does so, according to the Gospel of John, by laying his life down for the sheep. Jesus says in John 10: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . I lay down my life—only to take it up again” (10:11, 17). The reason Jesus is able to carry us safely through the valley of the shadow of death is because he took that death upon himself, to exhaust God’s anger against sin and defeat evil, and he rose as victorious King on the third day. He took his life up again that he might be our faithful, good shepherd, and give us new life. And so if we trust in Jesus, if we place the full weight of our hope in him and his life and death for us, then though we deserve the dungeon, we are welcomed into God’s victorious celebration, with a place at God’s own table as part of his family. If you have the shepherd, you have hope. Hope of victory, and a warm welcome into God’s presence.

Our good shepherd will lead us there. Verse 6: “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me” or, better, “pursue me all the days of my life.” The goodness and mercy of God through Jesus Christ are the two hounds of heaven, pushing along the flock, pursuing us into God’s very presence. And in that presence we will dwell forevermore, enjoying God and making much of him. The house of the Lord: the temple, the place of God’s special presence with his people. God’s home, now in heaven, waiting for Christ’s return to fill up the new heavens and new earth, where as Revelation 21 puts it, “the dwelling place of God [will be] with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4).

If you have the shepherd, you have hope. If you have the shepherd, you don’t have to be afraid. If you have the shepherd, you have everything.