

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
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## **The Lord Is My Shepherd**

Psalm 23

"The Lord is my shepherd...." Many of you could continue on from there. You know some of it, or maybe all of it, by heart." Psalm 23. It's the most familiar psalm, and maybe the most familiar passage in the whole Bible. It's often read at funerals, which is appropriate, because it offers great comfort and assurance in the midst of death and dying. But Psalm 23 has something to say beyond our experiences of mortality and grief. It's not just a psalm about dying. It's also a psalm about living.

The problem is, sometimes the text itself can grow lifeless because of familiarity. We know these words. We recognize these images. We've heard these cadences recited at the graveside, in the hospital room, and at bedtime. Psalm 23? Oh yes, I already know that one.

One of the ways we can hear this psalm afresh is by remembering that though the text doesn't change, our context does change. No matter how many times you have heard this piece of Scripture before, you've never heard it where you are right now. That includes being located in the midst of a pandemic. This is the first time you've encountered Psalm 23 in a sanctuary where every worshiper is wearing a mask.

Behind those masks are a variety of facial expressions which you can't fully make out. Though some are smiles, behind those smiles are also feelings of worry, fear, and anxiety. In early April, as we were feeling the initial intensity of COVID-19, Timothy Dalrymple wrote, "Calling these anxious times is like calling love an emotion: true, obvious, and understating the experience." He went on to say, "Our hearts are tense. Our thoughts are restless. We find it difficult to concentrate. We read the streams of online content constantly and desperately. We devour the news and the news devours us."<sup>1</sup>

In times like these, we need to face the bad news. But we also need to hear good news that brings life. "The Lord is my shepherd." That's the psalmist's headline. The rest of the psalm unfolds and details this theme. So let's take this beloved passage of Scripture and explore it in greater detail.

When we hear the opening profession of faith, "The Lord is my shepherd," we often picture someone tending to sheep. Jesus is often depicted with a staff in one hand and a lamb in the other, while the rest of the flock follows along. While there's certainly some truth in this kind of imagery, there may be more going on in the psalmist's mind than just a day in the fields. In the ancient world, kings were often known as the shepherd of the people. They were responsible for providing for and protecting the population. This part of a ruler's identity is preserved and perpetuated by some of our own thinking and terminology. For instance, folks will sometimes speak of how our nation's President, no matter who is in office, has the job of protecting the people, which means that in less than a month, when we cast our votes, part of what we're doing is electing a shepherd-in-chief.

So to declare, "The Lord is my shepherd" is to declare your loyalty to God and your intention to live under God's reign. That's where authentic life and lasting security are

found and experienced. And this kind of life, this kind of security, comes from knowing that God provides. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want” (v. 1). An even better translation might be, “I lack nothing” (CEB). Or as another version puts it, “The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need” (NLT). That’s easier to profess than to practice, especially in a consumer-oriented culture where we’re driven more by greed than by need, and where we’re constantly bombarded with messages telling us that we need more. Maybe one of the spiritual gains we can experience during the coronavirus pandemic is a return to satisfaction with more of the essentials of life—food, shelter, work, family, relationships.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters” (v. 2). That sounds serene, doesn’t it? At first glance, this may sound like the biblical equivalent of the slogan from the poplar commercial where a woman is relaxing in her tub, soaking under a layer of bubbles, saying to herself, “Calgon, take me away!” “Lord, take me away! Take me to a calm place removed from all the emails, the spam calls, the Zoom meetings, the online learning, and the campaign commercials.” Millions of us are lighting candles, meditating, practicing mindfulness, taking up yoga, or searching for the perfect app that will lead us to perfect peace. Green pastures. Quiet waters.

There’s nothing wrong with seeking out some peace and tranquility. Psalm 23 does its share of that. But in verses 2 and 3, the primary message isn’t about being transported to one’s happy place. It’s about how God, in his sovereign goodness, provides what the psalmist, and you and I, need to be alive. For a sheep, to “lie down in green pastures” means to have food. To be led “beside quiet waters” means to have something to drink. To be led “in right paths” means that danger is avoided and proper shelter is attained. As one commentator has put it, to say that God “restores my soul” is to say that God “keeps me alive.” And God keeps the psalmist alive “for his name’s sake.” In other words, in keeping with God’s fundamental character, his will and power to save.<sup>2</sup>

This brings us to the center of this familiar psalm. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (v. 4a). This verse takes us down about as far as we can go, to a place of life-threatening evil. As with the rest of this psalm, the translations vary. “The darkest valley.” “Valleys as dark as death.” “The dark valley of death.” “The valley of deep darkness.” There are many options.

In one episode of the popular animated television series *SpongeBob SquarePants*, SpongeBob and his friend Patrick board the wrong bus, which takes them down a cliff to the eerie town of Rock Bottom, inhabited by strange deep sea creatures. After missing the last bus back to his hometown of Bikini Bottom, SpongeBob ends up alone in the bus station in the middle of the night, with all the lights out. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a glove light, but when he switches it on, it immediately fizzles out. That’s when, with eyes wide in fear, SpongeBob utters the memorable line, “This isn’t your average everyday darkness. This is advanced darkness.”

Even the phrase “advanced darkness” wouldn’t fully capture what the psalmist has in mind. He uses a word that simply means “darkness” or “deep darkness.” As you can tell, different versions of the Bible try to capture it in different ways, but the traditional “valley of the shadow of death” is still probably the most poetic and powerful. The psalmist declares his confidence that in the midst of conditions and circumstances where darkness has overcome light, and death is on the verge of extinguishing life, God is there. God isn’t lingering back in the green pastures or relaxing beside the still waters, indifferent to your troubles. No, to wherever you have descended, God has descended. The shepherd/king who provides for your life will not withdraw his presence or protection when you’re overwhelmed by the enemies of life, whether disease, disaster, fear, financial loss, abuse, abandonment, injury, injustice, or any other threat to God’s saving purposes. “You are with me; Your rod and your staff they comfort me.” The “rod” could be a reference to a shepherd’s implement,

though it could also signify royal authority. Again, our assurance is rooted in the sovereignty of God, who is not a detached ruler, but deeply and personally present in our lives.

This brings us to the last segment of this familiar psalm. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows" (vv. 5). There may be some more sheep/shepherd imagery in the verses, but overall there's a shift to portraying God as a gracious host. In either case, the host does for the guest what the shepherd does for the sheep, namely, provides food, drink, and shelter or protection. So as we near the conclusion of the psalm, we return to where we began. God knows the needs of his people and provides. The Lord is still our shepherd, and we still shall not want.

After taking us on a journey across the pasture, by the stream, through the valley, and to the table, Psalm 23 closes with a reaffirmation of God's essential character. This entire psalm has been about who God is, what God is like, and how we should live in light of that. Now the psalmist concludes, "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (v. 6). This "goodness" and "love" aren't vague and generic concepts. They're God's goodness and God's love. God's goodness is his benevolence and generosity toward us, revealed in the way he provides for us, forgives us, restores us, and works in our lives to accomplish his gracious purposes.

God's goodness is often paired with his love. The Hebrew word translated in the NIV as "love" can also be rendered as "mercy" or "kindness." It has to do with God's compassion toward us in our neediness and sinfulness. It reflects God's faithfulness, his unwavering loyalty to his relationship with us through Christ.

The psalmist says that the goodness of God and the love/mercy of God "follow" you and me in our lives as his people. "Follow" can have the sense of to go with, or be with, or accompany. But the verb used here in verse 6 has an even stronger and more active sense to it. It means to "pursue." In other words, God's goodness and mercy seek after us. I like Eugene's Peterson's rendering, "Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life." God is in active pursuit of you, not as an enemy to do you harm, but as a loving redeemer who knows you personally and wants you to know him personally.

And knowing God personally through faith in Jesus Christ is inseparable from being at home in the community of God's people. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." This isn't just a word of assurance in the face of death, but also a word of admonition about life. A life of dwelling in God, and abiding in community with the people of God, where we can bring our anxious and fearful selves, and experience rest and restoration.

Minister and hymn writer Isaac Watts composed "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need," a paraphrase of Psalm 23 that reads: "The sure provisions of my God / Attend me all my days; / O may your house be my abode, / And all my work be praise. / There would I find a settled rest, / While others go and come; / No more a stranger or a guest, / But like a child at home."<sup>3</sup>

The Lord is my shepherd. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Dalrymple, "Be Not Afraid." Christianity Today website. April 1, 2020. Accessed October 7, 2020 < <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april-web-only/be-not-afraid.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> I'm reliant here on the commentary of J. Clinton McCann, Jr. "The Book of Psalms." *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015) 767-768.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Watts, "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need," 1719.