

The Lord is my Shepherd

Theme: The Lord's sovereign care

The Lord is our provider

- I. He seeks a personal relationship
- II. He provides for our needs
- III. He restores from life's stresses
- IV. He guides along the right paths
- V. He protects from adversity
- VI. He comforts in times of danger
- VII. He preserves in the face of enemies
- VIII. He heals our hurts

Resolution: There is hope and security in the Lord all the days of my life.

Introduction

In these challenging days, our world has been turned upside down. It seems that everything is different. We have been brought to our limits and beyond our limits.

Our strength and comfort must come from a source beyond ourselves. That is why I am turning to Psalm 23.

Background

What is a psalm?

I took an interesting course at Wheaton College called the “Bible as Literature”. This does not mean the Bible is only literature which is a class I took in public high school, rather that God chose to reveal himself through different literary forms.

Psalms are poems. They are lyric poetry.

Lyric poetry is characterized by its use of images, symbols, allusions, metaphors and similes. The meaning of these images and symbols are interpreted best when we understand the historical and cultural setting from which they derived. In Psalm 23, the figure of the shepherd’s relationship to his sheep is the principle metaphor. Therefore, we need to understand shepherding in the land of Israel.

Another characteristic of the psalms as lyric poetry is that they are primarily an expression of experiencing God—the feeling, the emotion of God’s people toward Him.

C.S. Lewis writes: “The psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections which are proper to lyric poetry.”

I am not really a poet. My poems are quite simple.

Roses are red, violets are blue, I love Rhonda, through and through.

The authorship.

This is a psalm of David. It is filled with vivid images of David’s own experiences as a shepherd in the fields of Bethlehem. 1 Samuel 16:11 records that he is tending his sheep when Samuel comes to anoint him as the next king.

Exposition and Application:

Let us consider a familiar psalm, twenty-three, from a fresh perspective.

I. The Lord seeks a personal relationship (v. 1a)

The Lord is my shepherd . . .

“The Lord” translates the Hebrew word, YAHWEH. This is one of three principle names for God in the Old Testament. YAHWEH is understood both as the Lord of all and as the one who relates to and reveals himself to the people of Israel. He is not an abstract concept, but is a personal God. He is the covenant-keeping, promise-keeping God. He performs saving acts on behalf of his people.

The Lord is *my shepherd*.

The use of the shepherd image for the Lord is not unique to the 23rd Psalm. “From the idea of the shepherd as protector and leader of the flock, came the concept of God as the shepherd of Israel” (Scott, p. 398).

Jacob was the first to use this figure in relationship to God. Jacob blessed Joseph’s sons and said, “May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day . . . bless these boys (i.e. Ephraim and Manasseh).”

The shepherding conditions of Ancient Israel were such that the shepherd had a name for each animal of his flock.

When I met an Arab shepherd boy on the Mount of Olives, he was calling each of his sheep by name.

My grandfather Mason was a farmer and we spent time on the farm. One summer, my older brother and I raised sheep. Just two. We had names for the two sheep, “Lambkins” and “Lamb chops.” In working with these two sheep over the course of the summer, my brother and I discovered that they are not very intelligent animals. They find themselves in all kinds of trouble. They are stubborn. This is not a favorable analogy to us.

At the end of the summer we were seated for a big meal around the farm table. Everything was delicious until one of the family members asked me if I was enjoying eating the delicious Lambchops. I quickly got up from the table with tears in my eyes!

By using the shepherd image, the Psalmist is stressing the personal relationship he had with the Lord.

The Psalmist is likening himself to one of the sheep. Sheep are totally dependent on the shepherd.

In this ancient world, the shepherd led the sheep to grazing and water which were often sparse in the drought of summer. He protected the flock from the attack of wild animals. He guided the sheep over difficult terrain to new grazing areas. The shepherd provided, protected, preserved, and indeed, he did everything for the weak and defenseless sheep. The word translated “shepherd” literally mean “one who nourishes.”

The shepherd metaphor is used throughout the Old Testament but the distinctive feature of Psalm 23 is that the Psalmist declares, “MY shepherd.” In other passages, the Lord is seen as the shepherd of Israel, not as the shepherd in relationship to particular individuals. This first person pronoun appears seventeen times in this psalm.

Many world views today view God as unknown, uncaring and impersonal.

This is very different from the pantheism of animistic religions, or panentheism and deism . . . or of God as an impersonal force.

Several truths are presented in verse one.

- He is a personal God who cares for us as a shepherd cares for his flock.
- He is the Lord upon whom we are totally dependence.
- Like sheep, each of us has “gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way.”

II. He provides for our needs (v. 1 b)

I shall not be in want . . .

David declares that the Lord provides for him in such a way that he “shall not want (lack)” . . . The verbal form here is imperfect conveying the idea of habitual experience. A better translation would be: “I do not want.” The assurance expressed by the Psalmist is conditioned by the preceding clause, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

In that sheep are not animals of luxury the Psalmist is probably referring here to the “want” (i.e. lack) of basic necessities rather than extravagant desires.

Now my son, Ron, likes cars. He would love to have a Ferrari 575 Maranello with its 5.7 liter V 12 engine and 500 horse power high performance engine housed in it sporty design which goes for \$400,000.

Or, he may need his Chevy Cavalier to transport him to meet with his clients for financial planning. What has God provided? His need . . . not his want. God promises to regularly provide for our daily needs, not our wishes. And, God knows what our needs are.

We can be assured with the Psalmist that because the Lord is our shepherd He will make provision for our needs as well (Matt. 6:25ff and Phil. 4:19).

III. He restores from life’s stresses . . . (v. 2)

*“He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.”*

Verse 2 begins a catalog of Lord’s provisions. For sheep, the basic necessities for sustaining life are herbage and water. These two elements are mentioned in this verse but not primarily because they are a source of nourishment. The provision here is that of repose. The flock’s action is not one of eating but of lying down in green pastures. It is not one of drinking water but being led beside “waters of rest.”

The pattern of shepherding in this ancient world and difficult terrain involved beginning the sheep on rough herbage early in the day and then leading them to progressively sweeter grass as the day progresses.

The shepherd brings the flock to a cool shady area with lush green grass for rest around midday. Siesta time!

The expression, “still waters” (KJV), brings to mind the fact that sheep will only drink still water. They fear fast flowing streams because the combination of heavy wet wool and motion could cause them to drown. However, the Hebrew expression is best translated, “waters of rest” conveying the idea of waters “by or at which rest might be enjoyed” (Alexander, p. 195).

The word “lead” can refer to a gentle guidance rather than a harsh driving action. The word can also mean “nourish” or more generally “provide for.” This points to the tending and the caring of the shepherd for his flock by providing these places of rest (Alexander, p. 195).

Application. Within the hurried, frantic pace of our contemporary society, the Lord can provide for us the physical, intellectual and emotional repose we need. In the words of Dr. Richard Swenson who wrote the book *Margin* saying that we need margins in our lives. We need a space between ourselves and our limits held in reserve for contingencies or unanticipated situations. We write words across the entire page by living overloaded lives. Overload is hurry, margin is calm.

Many who came to this pandemic did not have the margins to absorb the physical, financial, emotional and relational stresses of the extraordinary crisis.

We must allow Him to lead us beside “waters of rest.” Then, we can find refreshment and restoration for our lives.

Verse 3a. “He restores my soul.”

The word translated “restores” means to “bring back to a previous condition” by reviving what has lost its vitality. The Psalmist speaks of a restoration of his “soul” which refers to the whole person—physical and spiritual. “The Lord God formed the man from the

dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (soul, *nephesh*)” (Genesis 2:7).

Application. God wants to restore our whole being. We can turn to him for spiritual and physical refreshment.

IV. He guides along the right paths (v. 3b)

“He guides me in paths of righteousness . . .”

The expression, “paths of righteousness,” immediately connotes the idea of morally pure behavior—uprightness of character and faithfulness to God. However, we should first think about the imagery of the shepherd and sheep. “Paths of righteousness” literally means “right or straight paths.” As the shepherd guides his flock to fresh grazing areas he must lead them along safe paths.

In this world of moral confusion, global terrorism, potential pandemic diseases . . . we too can be confident of the Shepherd’s wise leading. He knows the right paths for us to take.

“For His name’s sake . . .”

The Hebraic understanding of a person’s name is that it represented one’s whole character. They believed that it was important that a person live up to his name. If a sheep loses its life, the shepherd is the one responsible. His name and vocation are at stake. The Psalmist is confident because the Lord, YAHWEH, will be true to His name. He is a just God. He is a covenant-keeping God. **David is confident because the Lord’s reputation is at stake not his own.**

As we go through life, our hope for security is not based on our personal ability or goodness with the philosophy, “If I am good, God will bless me.” Some people view God as a policeman—step out of line and He gives you a ticket.

Rather, our hope is based on the Lord’s faithfulness to his strong name. We do not need to be anxious because He is able to and desires to accomplish His perfect purposes in our lives. Those are the “right paths.”

V. He protects from adversity (v. 4a)

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil.”

Often this psalm is read at funerals.

The English translation “though” is too weak for the Hebrew. It conveys that the valley experience can be avoided. A more accurate translation is “when.” David is expressing

the probability of adversity in the future. The point is not that the Lord keeps us FROM difficult and sorrowful experiences, but rather that He is with us WHEN we endure them.

Jesus promised, “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (John 16:33).”

The expression, “shadow of death” is literally, “death-shade.” It is a poetical expression for the profoundest darkness (Alexander, 196). However, we are reading into this expression that it primarily refers to death.

There is a valley between Jerusalem and Jericho called the “valley of the shadow of death.” I walked with my professor this 17-mile trek and walked through this valley. Picture with me this valley.

The picture created is that of a dark valley in the rugged terrain of Palestine. This is where the fears of the sheep were greatest because lurking in the shadows are wild animals which make their homes in the caves along the valley’s walls. Their fears are also due to the narrow paths which weave beside steep precipices. These paths are sometimes so narrow that is impossible for the sheep to turn around.

This valley of dense darkness represents adversity or sorrow, depression, conflict, stress, broken relationship, marital strife, loss of employment, financial pressures, sickness, illness, even impending death itself called “the last enemy” in contrast to the smooth paths of righteousness.

Here David declares, “I will fear no evil.” This evil simply means “violent results, harm, or injury caused by going astray, or falling, or being attacked by beasts or robbers” (Daniel, 90).

VI. He comforts in times of danger . . . (v. 4b)

*For Thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me (KJV).*

The reason we need not be afraid of difficulty or impending adversity, including death, is not because we ignore it or pretend it will not come, but because we acknowledge the active and powerful presence of the Lord in the face of it. When no friend can come along and no material resources are of any comfort, then His presence is sufficient and His provision more than adequate.

For Thou art with me.

Up to this point David referring to the Lord in the third person. Now he changes to direct address. Perhaps the change is evoked because David has visualized a fearful experience in his own life and his attention is now focused exclusively on the Shepherd.

The reference to the rod and the staff is understood primarily as symbolic of the shepherd's presence. The rod and staff stress the fact that the shepherd is there with the sheep. This is an expansion of the clause, "for Thou art with me." In the presence of these objects the sheep feel secure.

The rod and staff have a functional value as well. The rod was a "straight stick tipped with a ball of bitumen hard as a rock" to defend the sheep against attacking animals. For the purpose of counting the rod is placed on the back of each sheep as the flock enters the fold at the close of the day.

The shepherd leans on the staff for support and strength. The staff had a curved crook to rescue sheep from gullies.

These two tools are emblematic. They are a symbol that brings comfort from actual sorrow not simply protection from possible danger. Again we are reminded that we are not promised immunity from difficulty even if the Lord is our shepherd. We are promised comfort in the midst of trial.

VII. He preserves in the face of enemies . . . (vv. 5-6)

*You prepare a table before me
In the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup overflows.*

Some interpreters suggest that there is now a change of metaphors. The Lord is being likened to a host rather than a shepherd. The preparation of a table, the anointing with oil and the cup are all acts of hospitality in the ancient Middle East. Or, perhaps this human metaphor of hosting is being applied to the care of a shepherd for his sheep.

Verse 5. When one stresses the hospitality imagery. For the host to receive a guest and eat with them was equivalent to a covenant of protection. If that guest had enemies, the host was honor bound to protect him. The cup would be the wine cup which was passed around to the guests during a meal. Anointing the head with oil was an act of hospitality (Ryken, 133). Offering a meal is a promise of protection.

If one stresses the shepherd-sheep imagery, you could picture the table as the green grass the shepherd provides for his flock. The act of anointing with oil may refer to the shepherd who anoints the scratches on the sheep when they return to the sheepfold after a long day. The "cup" may refer to the large two-handed cup in the fold from which the sheep would drink and in which the fevered one would sink its nose (Ryken, 134).

Application. Nothing can impact our lives except what He permits for His glory and our growth into His likeness.

VIII. He heals our hurts

Verse 6 . . . Shirley, Goodness, and Mercy . . . I thought were three girls' names.

*Surely goodness and love will follow me
All the days of my life
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
Forever.*

“Surely” is an adverbial particle which means “only” or “nothing but” goodness and lovingkindness will follow me. “Goodness” is the outward manifestation of the inward quality of being good. “Lovingkindness” is the idea of faithfulness to an established relationship motivated by love. God’s love is unconditional.

The term “follow” is the idea of pursuing with determination.

The “house of the Lord” is the tabernacle at Shiloh. Remember that the tabernacle was the place God’s glory was displayed, his *shikinah kabod*. However, for the sheep it is the sheepfold where each night the shepherd brings his sheep and remains at the entrance to protect them.

“All the days of my life . . .” parallels “forever.” God promises his presence now and for all eternity. The focus is on God’s care throughout this life. We do not need to live with constant anxiety.

When people let you down . . . your mom and dad go through divorce, a friend abandons you in time of need, a person cuts off a relationship with you, you can feel the pain of loss. You can live in fear of losing other people and things in life. This is the promise of God’s presence. God’s goodness and loyal love will pursue you all the days of your life.

Conclusion

Shepherds know their sheep by name. Perhaps you have heard the still, small voice of God calling your name. He wants to enter a personal relationship with you as your Shepherd.

Jesus reinforced the shepherd theme when he said, “My sheep hear my voice.” He is the “good shepherd.” He laid down his life for the sheep (John 10:11ff).

Perhaps you are hearing his voice calling you today. He desires to have a personal relationship with you. He is offering abundant life. He is offering eternal life.

For those who know the Good Shepherd. He wants to lead you beside quiet waters. . . waters of refreshment. Take some quiet time each day with God.

He promises his

- provision,
- restoration,
- guidance,
- protection,
- comfort,
- preservation and
- healing.

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