

The LORD Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23

This morning I wanted to step out of our Hebrews series and into what is without question the most familiar Psalm, if not the most familiar chapter in the whole Bible: the great Shepherd Psalm, Psalm 23. Because every now and then, we just need to hear from God in the Psalms.

We're actually going to be spending our summer in the Psalms, beginning in July. We'll have a team of preachers taking us through selections from Book 2 of the Psalms (chs. 42-72). And I've often said (only half-jokingly) that I would be happy to just preach the Psalms the rest of my life. That's where my heart has been this week, and so that's where we are this morning.

It is nothing short of remarkable how these simple lines have captured the imagination of not just believers, but popular culture as well. Not only is it a personal favorite of many Christians, anytime a funeral is depicted in film or on television, you can almost guarantee you'll hear this psalm (of course, that's because it's commonly read at real funerals). 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 to all people—"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 that picture is only amplified when you combine it with the imagery of people as *sheep*—weak, needy, defenseless before predators, and perhaps worst of all, prone to wander. Remember what Jesus saw when he looked out on the people throughout all the cities and villages of Judea, that they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36).

Vulnerable sheep passing through a dark, dangerous valley—that's a fitting metaphor for life in a world where brokenness, sin, and evil 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.

And yet, I think there's a second reason that this psalm resonates so deeply and so broadly. It's because it doesn't just give voice to the problem; it points us to an *adequate solution* to the problem—that there is a shepherd able to lead us sheep safely through this dreadful valley, such

that we need not be afraid. And his name is Yahweh—the LORD. The King of Israel and God of all creation.

And it's important to understand, if we're going to make sense of Psalm 23, that there is a strong connection between the office of *king* and the role of a *shepherd* in the Bible. That the phrase in Matthew 9, that the people were like “sheep without a shepherd,” actually comes from the Old Testament. It was used to describe when a king or a leader failed to rule his people well. Because kings in the Old Testament (and often in the broader ancient world) were charged with *shepherding* their people. For instance, David was taken from among the flocks (literal sheep) to be “*shepherd* of my people Israel, and . . . *prince* over Israel” (2 Sam. 5:2; cf. 7:7). Or even how God describes his own kingship. The opening line of Psalm 80 says: “Hear us, O *Shepherd* of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit *enthroned* between the cherubim, shine forth” (Ps. 80:1). God is a *shepherd* sitting on a *throne*.

And as a Shepherd-King, God expected his human kings to act like shepherds as well. Which is why, when they failed, 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).

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). Because the LORD our shepherd is our King. And 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 in order to provide for us, to protect us, and to bring us safely home.

That's actually how this psalm is laid out: you have 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: if you have the shepherd, you have everything you need, vv. 1-3.

If You Have the Shepherd, You Have Everything You Need (vv. 1-3)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
 He leads me beside still waters.
 He restores my soul.
 He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. (23:1-3)

This is a beautiful picture of God's provision. The shepherd supplies everything the sheep needs for life. Food—green pastures. Water—still waters. Rest, direction, guidance. The point here and throughout the psalm is that if you have the shepherd, then you have everything you need. In fact that's really what v. 1 is saying: “The Lord is my shepherd, *I shall not want*.” That line, “I shall not want” is 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 shall not *lack*, or as the NIV translation puts it, “I shall 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 experience tells us something different. That we actually have great need in life. Urgent needs that we don’t always know how to meet. Sometimes it’s as simple as a ride to the doctor, or a little time to ourselves. Sometimes it’s as personal as needing a friend—someone we can talk to, who we can trust. Sometimes it’s a whole lot bigger than that. We need a job. We need a place to live. We need to fix our marriage. We need a miracle in our medical condition.

And the temptation, when we feel our great need, is to look inside to fill it. To depend on our own strength, our own resourcefulness, our own resolve and 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?’ That’s 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. Alcohol, entertainment, work, another person. And whatever it is, we look to that person or thing to be the shepherd of our souls who meets all our needs. We need them and yet we despise them, because they can’t do it what we need them to do. They keep letting us down. They can’t bear the weight of the burden. And neither can we.

Because ultimately, it’s not a weight we were meant to bear. Nor need we bear it, because God our shepherd-king bears it for us. “*He* makes me lie down in green pastures. *He* leads me beside still waters. *He* restores my soul.” As the Creator of the universe and the Redeemer of our souls, he has not only the power to secure for us all that we need to revitalize us in this fallen world, but the wisdom and love to know when and how to supply it. And if you have the one who is able to meet your needs, then even when you feel empty, you actually have everything.

When we travel with our kids, our children don’t have all that they need in their personal backpacks. We don’t make them carry around a week’s worth of food and clothes and make them responsible to keep track of it. So they don’t have all that they need for the trip in their personal possession. But they have us—their parents. And we have the means to meet their needs, and the love and wisdom to know when to supply it. So that as long as mom and dad are with them, they have everything they need for the trip. If you have the shepherd, you have everything you need.

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 huge 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 leads 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. He is the greatest treasure. 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, and if you have the shepherd, you have everything you need. Second, a good shepherd also protects his sheep. So if you have the shepherd, you don’t have to be afraid—v. 4.

If You Have the Shepherd, You Don’t Have to Be Afraid (v. 4)

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. (23:4)

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 violence, betrayal, hardship, and neglect. There are very real things to be afraid of; there are ways that this world doesn’t work the way it’s supposed to that can cause real harm and pain.

So he’s not saying here, ‘it’s not that bad.’ It can be really bad. And left to ourselves in the midst of that vulnerability, we can easily become self-protective. Which on the one hand, there’s a certain level of wisdom in that. If you’re being taken advantage of by someone, or in some way being exploited—especially by someone in a position of power over you—there’s no virtue in just laying down and taking that. It’s not okay for them to do that. You need to tell them no; you need to talk to someone you trust, to get help.

So there’s a certain level of just wisdom and common sense in guarding yourself. But in our fear, there’s also a temptation to become so guarded that we can simply shut ourselves off and not let anybody in. To build a wall between yourself and the world, vowing never again to be the victim. We can do it emotionally—we hide who we are or how we feel because we’re afraid someone might hurt us, or manipulate us, or disappoint us. We may do it physically. We avoid people, certain places, we close our hearts to others. And that’s not healthy either. Safety can be wise, but it can also be an idol. And to be completely honest, it’s not realistic. Because becoming over-protective of yourself or overprotective of your kids or your stuff—it doesn’t actually

change the fact of our vulnerability. It only creates the illusion of control. We need protection, but we need a protection that is bigger than ourselves.

And that brings us to the second observation about this verse. That the reason we're told not to fear is not because evil isn't real or we're not that vulnerable. It's because the one who is *with us* stronger than the evil and darkness.

"I will fear no evil, *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. If you have the shepherd, you have hope, vv. 5-6.

If You Have the Shepherd, You Have Hope (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:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (23:5-6)

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 we're brought into the King's presence, and 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 finds out that much of my life has been spent on the side of his enemies, ignoring or attempting to dislodge him from his throne (cf. Ps. 2:1-3)?

When we think of God's presence, it's so easy to fear his 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.

Because 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 that I may 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 not because he knows a short cut or another route around it. It's because he willingly plunged himself into it for us. He took that death upon himself, to receive God's righteous anger against sin in our place and to disarm all unrighteousness and evil in this world. And he rose victoriously as King and Savior on the third day. He laid down his life and took it 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 shall 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 everything you need. If you have the shepherd, you don't have to be afraid. If you have the shepherd, you have hope. And in Christ, that hope will not disappoint.