

“The Lord is my Shepherd.” Psalm 23

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Introduction

Beginning today, over the next few weeks in the month of August, we're going to be reading the Psalms together in a series called The Lord's Protection. Today's message is called “The Lord is my Shepherd,” and we'll be taking a look at Psalm 23.

I bet there are things in your life that you tend to take for granted, but, when you stop to think about it, you realize they are actually essentially important. For example, the rice, vegetables, meat, and fruit that we eat are necessary for our lives, but we take for granted the fact that we can just go to the store and buy them. But then you remember everything that had to happen before the food could reach our table, and all the people involved. The farmers that produced it with care, the hours it took the transporters to deliver it, the store workers who set it all out in the market, and finally, it comes to be on our dinner tables. I regret that I often approach Psalm 23 in a similarly familiar way. It is an incredibly famous passage, and foundationally important for our faith, so it's no wonder that the lyrics have been sung continually around the world. Today, let's dive again into this famous psalm, and think deeply about what it means.

The passage we will be reading is **Psalm 23**.

“A PSALM OF DAVID.

1The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. 3He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4Even 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. 5You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

This is the word of the living God. Amen.

I'd like to make three points from this passage about the Lord's Protection. First, let's trust the Lord our shepherd.

Second, the Lord our shepherd disciplines us in order to guide us onto the path of righteousness, so let's receive his discipline.

Lastly, the Lord our shepherd has won the battle, so let's take joy in his victory.

Today's three points are trust in the Lord, receive the Lord's discipline, and rejoice in the Lord's victory.

1.) The Lord is my Shepherd

Our first point is, the Lord is our shepherd, so trust in him. Take a look at verses 1 and 2. **"1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."** David, the author of this Psalm, sings that the Lord God is 'my shepherd,' so, through this metaphor, you can see he is comparing himself to one of the sheep in the shepherd's care. When David first appears in the Bible in 1 Samuel, he isn't a king yet, but a young shepherd boy. Because David himself was a shepherd, he was likely recalling that time as he sang this poem. Verse 1 is a really famous verse. **"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."** David sings that he 'shall not want' because the Lord is his shepherd. Why is that?

Shepherds made a living by raising and nurturing sheep. They would milk the sheep, shear their wool for clothes, and make parchment to write on from their hides. The job of a shepherd had a variety of components. They would care for the sheep by leading them to streams of water to drink and to pastures to feed and provide a place to sleep. Shepherds also looked out for the health of the sheep and performed a veterinarian role as well. Furthermore, sheep are not good at acting independently and live in flocks, so when one gets separated from the group and gets lost, it leads to high levels of stress for the animal. Because of this, the shepherd needed to watch carefully over the flock, and if, by chance, one did get separated, he would have to search for it and lead it back to the group. This job of raising sheep was really hard labor.

The Bible depicts the work of God as that of a shepherd raising sheep. Psalm 77:20 talks about a scene in Exodus this way. "You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron." And again in Psalm 78:52, "Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock." In the New Testament as well, Jesus is depicted as a shepherd. Mark 6:34 says, "When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things." Like a shepherd, the Lord supported David, brought him up, and met all his needs. For this reason, David confesses his conviction that he lacks nothing, that he has nothing left to want, that he is satisfied by the Lord, his shepherd.

How encouraged and reassured are we by the fact that the Lord is our shepherd? Recently, our lives have been turned upside down by the coronavirus pandemic. Some people's jobs have become incredibly busy, others have lost their jobs altogether. Many people have been experiencing more anxiety on a daily basis. However, even now, our Shepherd is sustaining us and providing for our needs. Our jobs, our daily provisions, everything we have has been provided for us. Because of this, even in these difficult times, we can say like David, "I shall not want."

Recently, I've been sensing the ways in which the situation with coronavirus has been revealing what my heart is truly following. While my wife has the ability to think about things optimistically, my personality is prone to worrying. I read the news on my phone, "Today there were x-number of new cases reported in Tokyo," and I start to worry and feel downhearted. I realized I was being tossed to and fro by the overwhelming amounts of information floating around. I learned that, once again, I need to repent, surrender my idols, and have my heart changed by the Lord, my true shepherd. Because of these recent events, I've been pushed to trust my true shepherd more and more, and found that true peace is something that is given to me by him.

The reason the Lord is protecting you is because he is your shepherd, and when we trust in Jesus, God's beloved Son whom he sent for us, we can know this experience intimately. Who is your shepherd? Our hearts have a tendency to follow after things other than God. In other words, we place our trust in idols. Let's surrender those idols and know our true shepherd more deeply, and let's trust in him who provides everything we need.

2.) The Lord who Leads in Paths of Righteousness

Our second point is, the Lord protects us and leads us in paths of righteousness. Let's look at verses 3 and 4. **"3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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."** David sings that the Shepherd who satisfies all his needs can restore his soul. Our souls cannot be truly satisfied by anything other than God himself. David sings that God restores and brings our souls to life.

After that, it says, **"He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."** What does he mean when he says, "For his name's sake"?

The Bible claims that God is the creator and ruler of heaven and earth. Psalm 19 boldly sings of God's sovereignty and splendor. In the New Testament, Paul writes that the creator, the

reigning God, works all things together for good for those who are called according to his purpose. So when the Psalmist says "For his name's sake," it means that the Lord, as a shepherd, protects his chosen and beloved sheep on his own honor. Therefore, David has confidence and joy in the fact that God takes responsibility to lead his sheep in paths of righteousness.

Take a look at verse 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."** There are times when shepherds need to move their flock to a new pasture. The land of Israel has long stretches of dry, rugged cliffs that are very unstable for sheep. Moving from one place to another was scary, always being one step away from death. There were also predators, like wolves, to be wary of. However, in the midst of that, David sings that he fears no evil. How can he say this? It's because his shepherd is with him.

"Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." A shepherd's rod was a long, thin stick made of wood, with a rope fastened to the end. With it, the shepherd would whip the sheep, as well as the surface of the ground. By inflicting pain, this tool could limit the movement of the animals, and by striking the ground, it could send a warning not to go in that direction. The shepherd's staff was long and curved at the end like a hook. It was a weapon used to drive away wolves and other predators, and the curved end could be hooked around a sheep's neck or feet to pull them back toward the shepherd, rescuing them out of holes or saving them from falling off cliffs. The rod and the staff were accompanied by pain and injury, so how could David sing that they were a comfort? Because through this very discipline, God is leading him on paths of righteousness, which is nothing other than his sovereign love. God will most certainly discipline those he loves. In Exodus, God used Moses and Aaron like shepherds to guide the people of Israel like sheep. However, the Israelites whom the Lord brought out of Egypt as his own sheep, time after time complained to Moses and Aaron, and to God, expressing their dissatisfaction and discontentment. So God responded by sending things like diseases and poisonous snakes. Many Israelites lost their lives, but the generation of people after Moses and Aaron, through the leadership of Joshua and Caleb, were able to enter the promised land. In this way, God uses the discipline of the rod and the staff to guide the people he loves into the promised land.

Right now, we are in the midst of something we have never experienced before. You and I have been prevented from meeting together for over six months now. But, sometimes, I sense that this may be good discipline from the Lord. In these times, it feels like I am forced to earnestly him, and to rely on him more than anyone else. And how much more have we realized the precious grace of being able to meet together for public worship? Through the

Lord's discipline, we experience deeper levels of intimacy with our creator that can only come from him, and we are led in paths of righteousness.

When I was in America, I had the chance to hear the life story of an older Christian man. He was raised in a Christian family, and, after seeing some movie when he was in highschool, he became interested in parkour, a sport where you jump between buildings and make your way through various obstacles. One day, his good friend attempted to jump to a roof from the top of a four-story apartment building, but he made a mistake and his foot slipped. Luckily, his friend was able to grab onto a drainage pipe that was attached to the building, and he got down with only a small injury. However, later his dad found out what a dangerous stunt they had attempted. With tears in his eyes, his father took off his belt and spanked him. "It hurt so bad!" he said, but he knew that his father had disciplined him out of love. From then on, he decided to quit parkour, and began to desire to love Jesus the way his father did.

Everyone, the Lord protects us because he is leading us in the path of righteousness. His discipline is full of love, and through it, he is guiding us. If this is the case, shouldn't we humble ourselves and receive this loving discipline? Of course, at times, the Lord's discipline feels long and bitter, but if he really loves us, he is disciplining us to lead us in the path of righteousness. So let's receive this loving discipline.

3.) Taking Joy in the Lord's Victory

Our third point is, the Lord our shepherd has won the battle, so let's take joy in his victory. Let's look at verses 5 and 6. **"5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."**

In this verse, it seems that God is inviting David to a banquet, and it says that he is preparing it without paying any regards to David's enemies. It is a celebratory feast right in front of his enemies, right in the face of danger, as if victory has already come. This scene of preparing a feast right in the eyes of the enemy also appears in another passage in the Old Testament, in 1 Samuel 25. When David was being chased by Saul, Abigail, the wife of a wealthy but wicked man named Nabal, prepared a feast for David and his servants. In the same way, David has a sense of peace knowing that, even when he is being followed by his enemies, God has already given him victory and welcomed him to a feast.

Then David sings, **“you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”** The phrase ‘anoint with oil’ means to lift a person’s spirits, to make someone healthy and strong, or to prepare. Perfume was made from mixing olive oil with various spices. At that time in Jewish culture, when someone was invited to another person’s house, guests would receive the hospitality of spreading perfume on their head and body to make themselves nice and clean. Also, it’s says the cup that they shared together was filled to overflowing. In this way, it is the Lord, David’s shepherd, who is preparing a feast for him, giving him grace, and celebrating victory. Verse 6 says, **“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”** David was running for his life from King Saul, who was trying to kill him, and was constantly in danger of death. But even still, the Psalmist sings that goodness and mercy are following him. Even when David encounters life-threatening danger, he trusts in God’s unshakable, unwavering love that overflows with grace, and he sings praise. And then he closes the song by saying, **“I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”** We sing this sometimes in our worship songs as well. In Psalm 27:4, David sings, **“One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.”** The thing that David sought more than anything else was to dwell in the house of the Lord, to gaze at his beauty, and to seek him in his temple. He desired to fellowship with the Lord 24/7, 365 days a year, and to never, not even for a moment, be separated from his presence. David asked, more than anything, for intimate fellowship with God, who, in perfect love, protected and guided him. And God gave him what he desired.

David, led and beloved by his own Shepherd, led his country like a shepherd as its king. However, he could not lead them as a perfect shepherd, and he, too, was defeated by sin. In the end, because of David’s sin, both his family and his country were split apart. However, we have been given the perfect Shepherd, and he is Jesus Christ. God’s beloved Son was born into this world and called himself “the Good Shepherd.” Not only that, he proclaimed that he would lay down his very life for his sheep, and so, he was crucified for us. Through his resurrection three days later, he defeated our most feared enemy, the death that came as a result of our sin. And those who believe that Jesus has atoned for their sins are welcomed into his temple, and into his kingdom.

Is there another God like this? Our true shepherd, Jesus Christ has completely defeated our enemy, and we who believe are invited into his kingdom. Let’s rejoice from our hearts! Because of Christ, we have true protection. We who believe have his protection, his grace, his love, and his affection, and we have been led into the house of God. Let’s believe in the Shepherd who laid down his life to save us and lead us, let’s trust him more, listen to his voice, receive his loving

discipline, and let's go together to the temple of the God who has invited us in. This is what God has promised to us in Psalm 23.

Let's pray.

Our Father, abounding in love and grace, who protects us, we praise your precious name. Lord, you are our true shepherd. We are thankful for your protection, that we lack for nothing, and that we have been given a living joy. Lord, we ask that you would help us, as your sheep, to listen and obey your voice. And we're thankful that, even when we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, you are with us, and we can move forward without fear. Please help us to receive your loving discipline, to walk in that path of righteousness, and help us to be able to walk with you as mature sheep. You invite us into your temple, and have given us victory. We are thankful that, through your beloved Son's atonement by his death on the cross, we who believe are invited into your house, and into your kingdom. We are thankful for Christ's perfect life. Lord, please continually guide us by your hand all the days of our lives. In the name of our loving Lord, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.