

MOUNT SINAI MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

MONDAY EVENING BIBLE STUDY

Psalm 23

The Good Shepherd and Gracious Host

Quote

“If He be a shepherd to no one else, He is a Shepherd to me. He cares for me, watches over me, and preserves me.”

Charles H. Spurgeon¹

I. Introduction

“The Shadow of Death”

After the funeral service of his first wife, the late Donald Grey Barnhouse, distinguished pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, was thinking about how he could convey to his young children the loss of their mother. As he tried to conjure up words of comfort, the shadow of a large van passed over their car as they were driving down the highway. Instantly, Barnhouse thought of the words needed for the moment. “Children,” he asked, “would you rather be run over by a truck, or by its shadow?” The children quickly answered, “Well, of course, Dad, we’d much rather be run over by its shadow! The shadow cannot hurt us.”

Then Barnhouse, the master illustrator, replied, “The truck of death ran over the Lord Jesus two thousand years ago so that only its shadow now passes over us. That is all that has happened to your mother. Only the shadow of death has passed over her. She is unharmed in heaven.”

This is the comforting message of Psalm 23, unquestionably the most-loved song from the inspired pen of David. If there is one psalm that has encouraged more hearts, it is this beautiful masterpiece, probably the best-known passage of the

¹ Steven Lawson, [*Psalms 1–75*](#), ed. Max Anders, vol. 11, Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2004), 123–124.

entire Old Testament. As one historian said of this towering psalm: “It has sung courage to the army of the disappointed. It has poured balm and consolation into the hearts of the sick, of captives in dungeons, of widows in their pinching grief, of orphans in their loneliness. Dying soldiers have died easier as it was read to them; ghastly hospitals have been illuminated; it has visited the prisoner and broken his chains, and, like Peter’s angel, led him forth in imagination, and sung him back to his home again. It has made the dying Christian slave freer than his master.”

Such is the powerful peace that has filled the troubled souls of believers down through the centuries. None who have feasted at the banquet table of this beautiful psalm go away hungry. The great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon called it “the pearl of psalms.” Alexander MacLaren, the noted Scottish expositor, said, “It has dried many tears and supplied the mold into which many hearts have poured their peaceful **faith**.” James Montgomery Boice extols it, noting, “Millions of people have memorized this psalm, even those who have learned few other portions. Ministers have used it to comfort people who are going through severe **trials**, suffering illness, or dying. For some, the words of this psalm have been the last they have uttered in life.” This psalm is, indeed, a masterpiece of inspired praise, testifying to the abundant **grace** and goodness of God to his people.

Here is a testimony by David, the author, of the Lord’s faithfulness as he looked back on his life. David wrote out of his own experience as he had spent his early years caring for sheep. The image of a shepherd with his flock was engraved upon his mind to represent his relationship with God. Likewise, David had known what it was to travel and be a weary guest who had enjoyed the care of a loving host.

This also pictured his relationship with God. So, in this psalm David pulled together both images to convey the abundant provision of God for all believers in need of his peace and protection.

II. Commentary

The Good Shepherd and Gracious Host

MAIN IDEA

David describes the Lord’s loving care for his own people as a shepherd’s devotion for his flock and a host’s provisions for his guests.

A the Good Shepherd (23:1–4)

SUPPORTING IDEA: The psalmist represents his relationship to God as a sheep to his shepherd, not lacking any rest, guidance, or safety.

23:1a. David began this psalm by introducing the first metaphor that describes the relationship between the Lord and his people with the tender analogy of a shepherd and his flock. During his youth David had been a shepherd watching his father's flock (1 Sam. 16:11, 19; 17:15), so he was very familiar with this picture.

Transferring the image to God, he declared, The **Lord is my shepherd**. The word *my* emphasizes how deeply personal and close was his individual relationship with God. Everything in the next four verses flows out of this shepherd motif.

What is so amazing is that in ancient Israel, a shepherd's work was considered the lowest of all work. A shepherd would actually live with his sheep twenty-four hours a day with unwavering devotion, day and night, both in fair weather and bad, to nurture, guide, and protect his sheep. The shepherd would assume full responsibility for the needs and safety of his flock, even risking his own life for their protection. This is what God has chosen to be to his people (cp. Pss. 28:9; 74:1; 77:20; 78:52; 79:13; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3). He is their everything, their constant protector.

23:1b. Because of the greatness of God and his constant, loving care over his flock, David concluded, **I shall not be in want**. Left to themselves, sheep lack everything, being totally helpless and defenseless animals who cannot care for themselves. But under the shepherd's care, all their needs are abundantly met. So it was for David, as well as for all believers who are under the watchcare of him who is all-sufficient, inexhaustible, and unchanging. All God's sheep, precious to him, **shall not be in want**. They will lack nothing that is good and necessary for enjoying life to the fullest.

23:2. Continuing the shepherd's theme, David boasted, **He makes me lie down in green pastures**. Sheep are fearful animals, easily panicked and, when scared, will not lie down to rest. Only the shepherd can provide the calm assurance to make them lie down in green pastures or grassy meadows. This speaks of the peace and true satisfaction that only God can provide his sheep.

What is more, David said, **he leads me beside quiet waters**. Literally, this refers to waters that have been stilled, further expanding this peaceful scene. Weary and worn sheep need a long, refreshing drink from the rapid stream. But being instinctively afraid of running water, the shepherd must pick up a few large stones and dam up a place, causing the rushing stream to slow its current and create quiet waters. Then the flock may drink with no fear. God gives true, abiding peace to believers who abide in him and drink of his **grace**.

23:3a. Moreover, this good shepherd **restores my soul**. This statement is subject to different interpretations. It may picture the straying sheep being brought back to the fold (cp. Isa. 49:5; Ps. 60:1). In Hebrew vernacular these words can mean “brings to **repentance**” or “brings to **conversion**” (cp. Hos. 14:1–3; Joel 2:12). Psalm 19:7 uses this same wording to picture the spiritual renewal or revival of a believer. But since the word for **soul** (Heb. *nephesh*) is accurately translated “life,” this may mean that the Lord restores the psalmist to physical health. Either interpretation is certainly true.

23:3b–c. Furthermore, David wrote, the Lord **guides me in paths of righteousness**. Unlike other animals sheep lack a sense of direction and can become easily lost, even in the most familiar environment. They easily go astray as they are prone to wandering. The shepherd must continually guide them to paths of **righteousness**, or “the right path,” if they are to be moved from field to field without falling into deep crevices or off ragged cliffs.

Likewise, God by his Word and Spirit guides his flock effectively in the right way.

All this God does **for his name’s sake**, meaning for the honor of his own glory, which is the highest of all his motives. Even when believers **sin**, God is committed to leading them back to the right path.

23:4a–b. Taking this image a step further, David portrayed the shepherd as being able to protect his sheep in their moments of greatest danger. **Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death**, David stated, **I will fear no evil, for you are with me**. The shepherd would lead his flock from one grazing place to another, a move which would often involve passing through a narrow **valley** between high jagged cliffs, often filled with potential dangers such as wild animals. The sun would be obstructed from shining into the valley, creating darkness or a

shadow. Such a shadow in the valley would often become a place of **death** for wandering sheep, hence a “shadow of death.”

Yet even in such danger, the Lord was present to guard and guide his flock, dispelling all **fear** of **evil** as he led them into paths of **righteousness** (v. 3).

23:4c. Keeping with this shepherd imagery, David declared, Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. The shepherd’s rod was usually an oak club about two feet long. It was used to defend the flock against wild animals such as lions or bears, as well as for counting, guiding, and protecting his sheep. And the shepherd’s **staff** was his crook. Bent or hooked at one end, it was used to pry sheep loose from thickets, to push branches aside, to pull fallen sheep out of holes, to lead them along narrow paths, and to drive off snakes.

Such tools were sources of comfort for fearful sheep and for David. He lived his life often surrounded by multiple dangers, yet God’s Word and loving hand were the most effective means of guiding and guarding his faithful servant David.

B the Gracious Host (23:5–6)

SUPPORTING IDEA: The psalmist represents his relationship to God as a guest to a gracious host, not lacking any provision, goodness, or eternal blessing.

23:5a. David shifted metaphors from the shepherd/flock motif to the host imagery. As a gracious host would attend to the needs of his guests, so David said to God, **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.** Though surrounded by many **enemies** who sought to harm him, David recognized that God was with him for his good, supplying his needs as a host would care for a guest. Again, the same central theme of this psalm is reinforced. Even under the most adverse circumstances, in the face of threatening enemies, David would lack nothing (cp. v. 1).

23:5b. It was the custom of a loving host to provide oil for the head of his honored guest to refresh him after his travels. Thus David added, **You anoint my head with oil,** speaking of the Lord’s ministry to revive his heart, especially when surrounded by many foes who threatened him. The presence of God invigorated him, renewing him for all the demands of life.

23:5c. Further, David testified, **my cup overflows**, referring to the constant supply of drink provided by an attentive host. His cup was always more than filled to the brim, overflowing with the most satisfying drink imaginable. This pictures the abundant supply of divine **grace** in David's life which was more than sufficient to strengthen and sustain him in the most dangerous circumstances. God is an infinite source of all that believers need to live victoriously in difficult situations.

23:6. Finally, David concluded, **Surely goodness** (Heb. *tob*, that which is pleasant, beautiful, i.e., God's presence and **grace**) **and love will follow me all the days of my life**, even when he found himself in life-threatening situations. Through thick and thin, in every extremity of **life**, God's blessings were chasing David. Thus, on a triumphant note David wrote, **I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever**.

Even death would serve David's greater good, which would usher him into God's immediate presence where he would enjoy the **goodness and love** of God forever, or literally "throughout the years." Nothing can separate the believer from the love of God, not even death (cp. Rom. 8:38–39).

MAIN IDEA REVIEW

David describes the Lord's loving care for his own people as a shepherd's devotion for his flock and a host's provisions for his guests.

III. Conclusion

Goodness and Love

The late Harry Ironside, noted preacher at Moody Memorial Church in downtown Chicago, told the story of a troubled woman who once came to him fearful that she was being followed by two men. Whenever she left her apartment, the two men would trail her, or so she thought. Whenever she stepped on the trolley, the two men were at her side. What was she to do?

Ironside quickly sized up that these two men were imaginary figures, figments of her imagination. Wishing to comfort her, he replied, "There's nothing to worry about. Those two men are David's servants, sent to help you." Ironside turned to Psalm 23:6 and showed her in the Bible, "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life." He assured her, "Those two men are named Goodness and Love and their job is to help you."

“Oh,” she said, content with the explanation, never to worry again. Would to God that all believers could be so simple in their **faith**, believing that the goodness and **mercy** of God are always present to bless them. Since our Good Shepherd and gracious host is always near to care for us, may our hearts be at peace.

IV. Life Application

Everything We Need

The sufficiency of Christ in the life of any believer is astounding, a matter of great comfort and encouragement. Whenever a person has Christ in his life, he has everything he needs because Christ is everything. Christ is able to meet every need. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Creator and sustainer of all, the infinite God who can meet whatever needs we may have. This is the central theme of this psalm, which is a source of **grace** to every believer. Because of the indwelling of Christ in believers’ lives, they will never lack anything they truly need within the will of God. Christ is their peace and protection in every situation, their guard and guide in all they do.

What a blessing it is for every believer, pictured here as a weak sheep and weary traveler, to know that Christ, the Good Shepherd and gracious host, is sufficient to meet every need. Christ is the full source and abundant supply for meeting every need we have.²

² Steven Lawson, [*Psalms 1–75*](#), ed. Max Anders, vol. 11, Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2004), 124–129.