

Psalm 23 • The Lord is my Shepherd

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I'm going to read the 23rd Psalm, and then we're going to pray, and then see what the Lord has for us. Okay? Goes like this:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

He leads me beside still waters.

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.*

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.” (ESV)*

Let's pray.

Thank You, Lord. Thank You, God, for Your Word. Now, as we unpack some of these verses here today, and just meditate on them this morning, would You please increase our understanding? Give us wisdom and application as well, Lord God, into Your Word. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, amen.

If you had the task of finding a metaphor to describe your relationship with God, I'm curious—not that I'm asking you to speak out right now, but what metaphor you might use? Because that is exactly what David is doing in the 23rd Psalm; he's using a metaphor to describe his relationship with the God.

And not surprisingly, he uses the one of a shepherd and his sheep. I say not surprisingly because we know that is what David did. He was involved in shepherding his father's sheep as a young man, and so he obviously knew and he understood the dynamic of that kind of a relationship and what it entails.

I've never shepherded real sheep with four legs; only you guys with two legs; but I've heard there's a lot of similarities. We'll talk about that later. Anyway, I shared that up at McCall, and some people looked at me sideways a little bit.

But anyway, the very first thing you're going to notice about what David says related to the opening statement of this Psalm is that it is personal. Notice he says: "*The LORD is my shepherd.*"

Now, that's significant because he could have made a doctrinal statement and said: The Lord is *a* shepherd. He could have even made it a little more emphatic by saying: The Lord is *the* shepherd. But he didn't. He made it personal. He made it intimate: "*The LORD is my shepherd.*"

And I think that's a fairly significant statement to make because one of the most powerful characteristics of the God that you and I serve is the fact that He is personal and that we can have a personal relationship with Him.

We in evangelical Christianity, we've thrown that term around a lot and we've almost redefined what a personal relationship means. We've used it to describe simply a Christian who's come to faith, and we'll say to somebody: Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? — and we just shoot that out there real quick. What that means essentially in our brains is: Have you accepted Christ as your savior? It doesn't necessarily mean that the person asking the question even has a personal relationship with Jesus, because you see, it's possible to know the Lord in the sense of salvation and not really know Him in intimate fellowship.

And I think there's probably a reality to that that every one of us can relate to. We've all been through periods of our life where we've become distant in our relationship with God. We know His salvation, and we know that we know that if we were to die today, we will go to be with Him for eternity; but as far as the intimacy, the connectedness of real, genuine fellowship and relationship, it can be very lacking—can't it from time to time? We all know what that's about.

But this is one of those interesting things. David makes this statement right at the get go: "*The LORD is my shepherd,*" and he's making the connection here

that as a child of God, I have a personal connection to Him that goes beyond anything that you could imagine.

We think about the personal relationship that we have within the context of families. We certainly have the DNA connection. We have the genes, and we can even see it because we look like our relatives—which may or may not be a good thing— but it doesn't necessarily follow that just because we have that genetic connection that there is a personal connection.

Example, a father and a son have a very definite biological connection but it doesn't necessarily mean they have a relational one. And even if one of those people wants to have a personal relationship, if the other one doesn't, there's not a whole lot you can do about that. Things are going to be distant. The same is true with our relationship with Jesus. He's the one who wants to have the relationship with us, but if we're pulling back, if we're distant, if we want to be distant or choose to be distant for whatever reason, there's going to be distance there.

And as sad as that is as it relates to human relationships and even our relationship with God, it is a great comfort knowing, number one, that God is knowable, and number two, that He desires to have a personal, close walk with us. I mean, think about that for a minute. God can be personally known as personal as knowing the person sitting next to you. God can be personally known. What is rather sad is how few of us have that kind of intimate relationship with Him, frankly.

And from what I can deduce from Scriptures, David took advantage of that response, that connection, that relationship. The more we've been going through the Psalms on Wednesday, and sprinkling a few of them here on Sunday morning, man, I can just see it all over again. David was just—he was right there. He just connected with God, and told God how he was feeling no matter how it was, what it was all about. And he was very honest and very genuine—and I mean, there was no façade.

It's pretty amazing. In fact, this whole idea of knowing the Lord seems to be the hallmark of what it means to be a believer or not knowing the Lord is the hallmark of what it means to be an unbeliever. Let me show you a couple of passages. First, from Jeremiah chapter 9. Look at this; it says:

Jeremiah 9:24 (ESV)

“...let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me...”

“...let him who boasts, boast in this, that he understands and knows me...”

What is God most concerned about as it relates to us and Him? It's that we would have that personal knowledge, that personal relationship to know the Lord.

Well, in the same way, you guys remember in the New Testament from the words of Jesus Himself, that those who will be gathered on His left on the day of judgment will be turned away with the words: *“I never knew you.”* (Matthew 7:23) Once again we come back to that idea of how important knowing the Lord is.

Our God can be known—I'll say it again—in personal, joyful relationship; and I believe that it does cause great joy.

I remember reading a story a number of years ago about a believer who was imprisoned for his beliefs and was thrust into a dark prison cell with no windows, and no light coming in, and no artificial light. He was literally cast into this cell, which was a place of total darkness; and he wrote how there were times during his incarceration where he had to get up and dance for joy because of the presence of the Lord. That relationship with God was so tangible, so powerful, that in the midst of that darkness, he just had to get up and dance. And that blows me away.

But the beautiful, wonderful, personal aspect of knowing the Lord—for many of us, our personal time with the Lord, we have to admit, is brief; and too often, it's limited to those times in our lives when we're facing some personal crisis. Then we're all too ready to get personal with God. But when things are going okay, we're on cruise, don't have any major pains to describe at that particular moment, we can get pretty distant, and we all have to admit that.

The truth remains that God waits to be known. I love how the Apostle Paul says what he says to the Philippians and to us. Let me put this on the screen. From chapter 3, verse 10, he says:

Philippians 3:10 (NIV)

I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings...

I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings.

I hear this from a man who knew the Lord, I believe, so much more than I. He tells in 2 Corinthians how he was taken up into a place of heaven and heard things that were unlawful for a man to utter, and the knowledge and the revelation that this man was given by the Holy Spirit apart from any human instruction, and yet the cry of his heart was: I want to know Christ.

It wasn't enough for him. He wanted more. He wanted a deeper, more intimate relationship with the Lord. He wasn't ready to just sit back and say: Wow, it's been good. I want more. I want to know Him in the power of His resurrection. He's like, you know what? I want to know Him in the sharing of His sufferings. I want to even know Him there. That's not necessarily a thing I'd put up on my fridge for a memory verse. I don't know about you, but that was where Paul's heart was: I want to know. I want to know. I want to have that personal walk with Him.

As we move on here now, in this short Psalm, David makes a statement about God's ability to be a good shepherd when he says: *"I shall not want."*

And I got to admit to you right now, this one always freaked me out as a kid. The 23rd Psalm made absolutely no sense to me. *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."*

In my Americanized vernacular, that meant: The Lord is my shepherd but I don't want Him. That's the way I interpreted it until I understood that *"want"* was related to my needs, and that David was essentially saying: The Lord is my shepherd, therefore, I shall have no need or I shall not have any want of anything.

But either way, even after we explain it, let's face it, it's a clumsy phrase—and it just doesn't work, frankly. It doesn't translate very well into our American vernacular. And I'll grant you, it's poetic, but it's tough—I mean, to really lay hold of it. I personally like better the simple statement, the Lord is my shepherd, therefore, all my needs are met, because that's what David is saying. It may not be as poetic as the other, but what it lacks in poetry, it gains in accuracy.

We learn from verse 1 that not only can God be known personally, but that He's ready and willing to meet our needs on a personal level. We learn a lot just from this very first verse. Jesus, our shepherd, cares for us, His sheep, in such a way as to meet our needs, and so forth.

Let me show you another passage from Philippians where Paul declares:

Philippians 4:19 (NIV)

... my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

...my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

I love that verse, but every so often, I have to go back and look at it and see if it still says, *all*. Because the enemy likes to come along and try to convince me that it no longer says, *all*, and that there are some things that God just isn't going to do for one reason or another, as far as meeting my needs. But you know what? We go back to the Word of God at a time like that and we bathe our heart in it, don't we? “*...my God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*”

David carries the metaphor of the shepherd-sheep further by saying in verse 2:

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

And obviously this speaks of the Lord's ability to settle David's nerves, his heart, when it's aflutter.

Like I said, I've never cared for the— not cared for, I don't mean it that way—I've never taken care of the four-legged variety of sheep but I've read a little on it, and I understand that they can be very skittish animals from the standpoint of being easily spooked. By the way, that applies— alright? Just in case you were wondering, that's one of those areas where the connection is real easy to make.

But here's what I understand: When sheep are on edge, if they feel like there's some reason to be anxious, that they will not settle down, they will not become restful, they will just be very agitated and can't relax. The job of the shepherd is to communicate something of the fact that things are going to be okay so that they can come to the place of relaxing and resting. And David says that the Lord does that for him. He does it for him.

And I think all of us would agree that that's no small thing because we all know what it's like to be upset and agitated and nervous— anxious to the point where we can't sleep at night, we can't eat, or we eat too much, depending on your flavor. And I think all of us would also agree that we differ in what is needed to talk us down from the ledge. Some of us may be a little bit easier along those

lines, but what we're learning from this is that our shepherd can calm our fears. He can do it.

I want to show you a wonderful statement made by Jesus in John chapter 14 on the screen. Goes like this:

John 14:27 (ESV)

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. (And then he defines that my peace) Not as the world gives do I give to you. (And then he says this:) Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

I've talked with people who are going through very difficult circumstances, fearful circumstances, and I have discovered with many of them that they are walking in a kind of peace that is just unexplainable. I mean, their circumstances would suggest that they ought to be very upset and agitated, but when we sit down and talk—I go there, dope that I am, saying, I'm going to go minister to this person, and they end up ministering to me because there's this peace that has settled upon their hearts. And again, it's an unexplainable thing.

Notice that Jesus said in that particular passage: I give you peace not as the world gives. See, the world gives peace based on circumstances, or maybe a bit of news that you got that might give you peace, or that results in peace—good news from the doctor or something like that—oh, finally I can rest. That's circumstantial peace.

Jesus gives a kind of peace that is not connected to the circumstances of our lives. It's just peace, and you don't know why you're feeling peaceful. You're sitting there, going: I know that I ought to be just going out of my brain here but I just have this sense of God's peace.

And I hope you've experienced that. I've been able to experience it a couple of times in my life, and it's a delightful thing. You never like the circumstances that go along with it, but it is an amazing thing.

But what's interesting about being anxious and being fearful—which I think every one of us can relate to, obviously on different levels, but—it is such a normal, natural response for you and I to become anxious and nervous when we get news that might lead us that direction, or whatever, that we never really take the time to consider that what we're doing, which is giving into fear, is wrong.

In other words, we think it's just like apologizing for the color of my eyes. It's just me. I mean, this is just me. When I hear bad news, whatever, I get really anxious. Have you ever heard somebody say he's just an anxious person—or she—or they'll even say it about themselves: I've always been a nervous person all my life? They talk about it like it's their eye color, and it becomes normal to the point where we never stop to realize that maybe it's something that shouldn't be happening in our life.

I got to tell you, there was a time in my life that was very revelatory. I mean, the Lord brought a powerful thing, a radical revelation into my heart and mind at one particular point that changed the way I saw fear. And He showed me—this is going to sound really elementary, but that's where I live—He showed me that my fearful attitude was missing the mark.

Those of you that know the definition of sin, it is missing the mark. In other words, the Lord revealed to me that my fearful attitude was a sin. Isn't that crazy?

Now, there's a lot of people that really tilt when you say something like that because that's like saying to them: Your blue eyes are a sin. To them it's just normal; it's the way they are. But here's what the Lord revealed to me— not only did He reveal that my fear was a sin, but that I could do something about it. I could confess it and bring it to the cross, and find forgiveness, and then I would be ready and able to take the next step, which is to learn to trust and to say: Lord, You are my shepherd, and I'm going to trust You.

So many times, we get into a state of fearful anxiety, and we want to go to the Lord, and we want to find His peace, but we haven't dealt with the fact that our fearful attitude has actually missed the mark as it relates to sin. We haven't brought our sin before the cross. People, can I gently tell you that sin still separates us from God? Not eternally. As a believer in Jesus, your sin can no longer separate you eternally from God, but it can separate you relationally—and relationship is what David is talking about here.

I've told you the example many times that when I do something against my wife, and say something that is hurtful or whatever, it's the same thing. There's a separation relationally, but it doesn't mean we're no longer married. It just means that there's a wedge; there's something between us, and I need to go to her, and I need to confess it, and I need to ask her to forgive me, and then she extends forgiveness. And once that happens, there's a free flow of relationship once again between us.

May I suggest to you that the same is true with your relationship with God? Sin still separates, right? It always has. It always will. It can't separate you any longer on an eternal scale because Jesus paid the eternal price of your sinning, and mine as well. Praise the Lord. But relationally speaking, your sin can still put a distance between you and God. And if you're feeling that distance of relationship, there might be issues you need to deal with as it relates to sin; and that's why God brings conviction upon our hearts that we would deal with them and get that relationship settled. And there's such a sense of—

Oh, when I come— there are periods of time in my life when I forget to come before the Lord and just say: Forgive me. Jesus told us to do that regularly in that thing we call the Lord's Prayer, forgive us our sins. We're supposed to make that a regular part of our prayer. Why? Because we need to get saved every day? Heavens, no!

You're saved once and for all when you come to the cross and accept what Jesus did there. You come for forgiveness because you don't want that relationship to be hindered in any way. I don't want my prayers hindered. I don't want my heart hindered toward God. I don't want any of that to have any sort of a barrier. Right?

So, I come to the Lord and say: Forgive me; forgive me for what I've done; that was wrong. Oh, and there's such a sense of release, and it's like the connection is remade. I didn't even notice the phone was off the hook to heaven, sort of a thing, and now all of a sudden, it's like, okay, we're connected. And I can just feel the closeness resume.

So, when it comes to fear, it's important that we recognize that fear is missing the mark. We need to confess it, bring it to the cross, and then we can come to the Lord and allow Him to give us that rest and peace that we are seeking, which culminates in what David says as he begins verse 3. Look there in your Bible:

“He restores my soul.”

And that's the result. That's the result.

My natural inclination, once again, is to become upset and anxious. I bring that to the cross: Father, forgive me for choosing fear over faith. Forgive me. Now, enable me to walk in the courage of faith, to trust in You, to rest in You, to know that You are my shepherd.

And then what happens? The Lord responds to that prayer of faith, and He restores my soul.

Our souls need to be restored, particularly during a time of anxiousness. Because remember, the soul is the seat of your emotions and your intellect, isn't it? Isn't it those two things that become really agitated when you're fearful? Your emotions obviously become agitated; you're obviously afraid. But then your intellect, your thoughts just go bizarre. They just don't—yours too. I mean, mine do.

They just take on this bizarre sort of a worst-case scenario, and I had these things going over in my mind, and I'm like, whoa! I'm literally talking to myself and making myself crazy. And you guys don't look at me like you don't experience that too. You do; you know you do, right?

We talked about that in the Psalms where David cried out to the Lord and said: *“How long, O LORD?... must I take counsel in my soul?”* (Psalm 13:1-2) How long must I receive counsel from my soul because that's not the counsel I want. I want the counsel from You. My soul is just making me even more scared—my emotions, my intellect, and so forth. Oh, I think we obviously know how needful it is to be restored in our soul. David tells us, in no uncertain terms, this is a birthright of the children of God.

Finishing verse 3, he goes on to say:

*“He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.”*

And this is just a simple way of saying: He leads me in the right way.

By the way, sheep are known for being very poor in the area of a sense of direction, and they're prone to wandering. Yeah, another one of those areas that just applies to us, right?

I've got two granddaughters, and one of them has an incredible sense of direction; she's the younger—I just gave it away, didn't I? And then the other one would get lost going to the bathroom and try to find her way back. So, it's funny; it's like, what goes into that—that one of them just has this sense?

Well, I think in a very real way we all have a propensity to lose our way, and we need the instruction of the Lord. We need the direction of the Lord. We need to

be led by God, don't we? Right? I mean, often. And God promises that He'll do that for us.

Let me show you a lovely promise in Psalms, a little bit later in the Psalms, chapter 32. We're going to read this:

Psalm 32:8 (ESV)

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go. I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

That's a glorious verse. It's a wonderful verse. It's a wonderful promise from God's Word. He says: I will instruct you, and I will lead you. I'll take you, and lead you in the way that you're to go.

We naturally like to take verses like this out of context and just assume that there's this automatic thing like: Well, I'm a Christian, and so God's just going to automatically lead me all the time in exactly the way I'm supposed to be going.

However, you read the next verse and you find out that there is a responsibility on my part to accept that leadership and that guidance. Check this out from the very next verse. It says:

Psalm 32:9 (ESV)

Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.

Be not like a horse or a mule without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.

You see, there's an interesting sort of a dynamic here. On the one hand, God promises He's going to lead and guide us; but on the other hand, we are told in no uncertain terms we need to be able to accept that leadership and that guidance, and not be that horse that's always bucking and biting and nipping and kicking and wanting to get away from you, and won't want—and doesn't want to stand near you unless you actually control him with a bit and bridle.

God doesn't want our relationship with Him to be based on a bit and bridle. He wants it to be based on a heart of love, where our response to His leading is,

yes, Lord. Yes, I accept that's good; that's a good thing. Rather than our response of, well, I don't know, let me think that one through a little while, God, because I'm not always certain You have my best interest in mind. Yeah—not the kind of relationship we want to have.

Verse 4 goes on and says:

*“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.”*

Obviously, the rod and the staff were the tools of the shepherd to direct the course of the life of the sheep.

But I want you to notice here in verse 4 how the pronoun changes. Did you catch that? Earlier, David was talking **about** his shepherd; now he's talking **to** his shepherd; and he goes from speaking about **he** to **you**.

“I will fear no evil for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

David speaks to his shepherd here with a declaration of faith to say: *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”* What is that? Well, anything in life that threatens our lives, brings darkness, fear and difficulty.

Actually, in the Middle East, when shepherds were taking care of their flocks, they would move them from pasture to pasture, and sometimes the moving of the flock would necessitate passing through a rocky area with canyon walls on the side that obscured the light of the sun. It was darker than it would be out in the open field, and there were also dangers that attended that sort of a thing. The rocky crags themselves presented danger; predators—animal predators could easily hide within those areas and prey upon the sheep; and dangers were aplenty.

But David speaks to his shepherd, and he says: Even when I'm going through that sort of a situation where it's dark and I know that there is danger very near, I know something else. You're with me. You're with me. You're with me in the midst of that. David knew that it was his responsibility to stay close to the shepherd, especially close during those times of danger.

If you're going through a time in your life that's trying and easily produces anxious thoughts, man, stay so close to your shepherd because dangers are real, and the enemy isn't going to look at your life and say: Eh, they're going through a hard spot right now; I'm going to ease up a little bit. No. In fact, he's going to do the opposite. He will kick you when you're down—and we know that he roams around searching for those whom he may destroy or devour, so, stay close to your shepherd; don't wander off.

Verse 5:

*“You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.”*

Now, this is, again, one of those declarations of faith that David makes. He says: *“You prepare a table for me.”* Now, you and I may not understand what that means from the standpoint of hospitality, because for you and I, hospitality is different than the way they saw it in the Middle East. When you came under someone's roof, you came under their protection. When you joined them within the confines of their home, they would lay down their life for you. And it remains that way to this day.

It's a crazy thing, but he's using now this different metaphor. He leaves from the shepherd-sheep metaphor, and now he goes to the host-guest metaphor saying: *“You prepare a table for me.”*

Well, we don't realize it, but what he is saying is: You bring me under Your protection and You provide for me. Now, notice how and where He does it. It's in the presence of his enemies. That's the point of what David is saying.

It's within the presence of my enemies. In other words, in the full view of those who would want to take me down, including the enemy of your soul, that the Lord prepares this place for you, this place of protection.

And what happens there? He says: *“you anoint my head with oil.”* Again, that's not something you and I do. I don't think you probably have guests over and say: Hey, welcome to our home; bend over— and dump a bunch of oil on their head. But they did it back then, and that was a sign of being a very good host—frankly, because it was refreshing. People would become very hot, and so forth, as they traveled from place to place, and so to refresh someone by pouring oil over their head was considered a very hospitable thing to do.

And then he goes on to say: “*my cup overflows.*” I sit down at this table that You've prepared for me in the presence of my enemies—in other words, in the full view of all those who want to take me down— and there is just this overflowing abundance to what You have given to me. You pour yourself out and it just overflows.

It's a really beautiful picture of God's blessing upon His children, what He desires to do, what He longs to do as we come under His protective covering.

Finally, verse 6 says:

*“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.”*

And here is beautiful— David talks about his expectation of God's goodness today, and he also talks about his full expectation of God's goodness later, after this life is over.

He says: “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me.*” That's an interesting statement, isn't it? – “*goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*”

It's interesting, as I get older, it's gotten easier for me to look back and to see that God's goodness and mercy have followed me. As a young man, it was completely a declaration of faith: I really hope God's goodness and mercy follows me. Well now, at almost 61 years of age, I can look back on my life and I can say: Wow, God's goodness and mercy has followed me. It really has.

And the older we get, the more we can look back and see that, and say that, and know that, for the rest of my days, I believe that God's goodness and mercy will continue to follow me because I see that He has been faithful.

And then as we look ahead beyond this life, notice that David expresses his assurance: “*and I (will) dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*”

Boy, that's what I want. That's what I want for myself. It's what I want for you. Confidence for today, assurance for tomorrow. Isn't that what you want, too? Let's be confident of the Lord's goodness for today and assured of His faithfulness and blessing and abundant provision for tomorrow as well.