

## “THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD”

### Psalm 23

“**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.**” King David wrote the words, but not the younger David. Not the David described in 1 Samuel 16 as “**ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features.**” Not the David of whom the Israeli women sang and danced: “**Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands,**” 1 Kings 18:7. David—this young, strong, seemingly invincible, larger than life, poet, musician, author, warrior giant-killer, and king.

No, this was the older David, the wiser David; the David seasoned by many dark shadows and a veteran of many deep valleys: once a fugitive, once an adulterer, once a murderer, once a father grieved by the death of a rebellious son. This David wrote Psalm 23; the David who had experienced pain, loss, failure, grief, depression, and yet amid all his heartache had also learned the comforting reality: “**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.**”

I graduated from the seminary in 1978; not as a giant killer, but as a young man in his mid-twenties with an undeniable sense of invincibility. After all, what could go wrong? I would graduate, get married, have children, serve as a pastor, retire; and, as imagined in the fairy tales, “live happily ever after.”

Back then, as a seminary graduate, I could have written a sermon on Psalm 23. Using all the resources of the seminary library—lexicons, commentaries, grammars—I could have accurately described God’s good shepherding; the green pastures and quiet waters of the Gospel; the paths of righteousness; the rod and staff; the overflowing cup and bountiful table; and, of course, dwelling in the house of the LORD forever.

The difference is: In 1978, as a young man, I merely knew and believed these realities. Now, forty-two years later, as a much older man; after experiencing heartaches, losses, cancer surgeries, unwanted divorces, financial difficulties, the death of loved ones—now, I more fully know these realities. I better understand God’s good shepherding, because I have experienced it not only in good times but in bad times; not simply in green pastures, but in deep, dark valleys in which I wondered if even the Good Shepherd Himself could deliver me. But He always did. Always.

There is a HEAD knowledge, a HEART knowledge, and a HURT knowledge. Head knowledge says, “I know.” Heart knowledge says, “I believe.” But hurt

knowledge says, “At last, I understand.” And so, in life, a deep valley or dark shadow becomes a truer kind of seminary. And it is in our need that we learn to confess: **“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”** Period.

That’s music to a sick man’s ears. That’s courage to a dying man’s spirit. That’s rest to a weary man’s soul. That’s comfort in hospital rooms and at gravesides. **“I shall not want.”** These words of David are as fresh and relevant as the day they were written; not the echo of the distant, dusty past, but the warm words of the living Savior who said: **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep,”** John 10:11.

David was the king of Israel. But before he was king, he was a shepherd boy who tended the flocks of his father Jesse. And as a shepherd, David understood the importance of good shepherding; of never forsaking the sheep; of leading the sheep to green pastures and still waters; of giving the sheep rest; of keeping the sheep on paths of righteousness, that is, on the right paths; of protecting the sheep from predators; and of bringing the sheep safely home.

Yet, as meaningful as these activities were to David as a shepherd, they were even more meaningful to David as one of the sheep, as one of us; as those described in Isaiah 53:6, **“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”**

When David penned the words of Psalm 23, he wasn’t simply writing about sheep. He was writing about himself. He was writing about the gracious and faithful way God had shepherded him through every phase of his life: youth and age, good times and bad, successes and failures, health and sickness, peaks and valleys.

Indeed, many verses of Psalm 23 suggest actual events in David’s life. Consider the words of Psalm 23:1, **“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”** For David, this was neither a vain wish nor an empty confession. David lived the reality of these words many times, and certainly when he faced the giant Goliath. Remember that epic battle? Was there ever a greater mismatch than a young shepherd boy with a slingshot versus a nine-foot-tall giant, whose armor alone weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds?

And yet, instead of running from the giant, David ran toward Goliath, shouting as he ran: **“You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head,”** 1 Samuel 17:45-46.

With God on his side, David lacked nothing. David saw no need for fear or

surrender. The same David who would write in Psalm 27: **“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”** And dear friends, though there are many types of towering giants in this world—marital problems, financial difficulties, loneliness, guilt, depression, anxiety, illness, addictions; nevertheless, with the LORD as our shepherd, we have no reason to fear or surrender either.

Or consider Psalm 23:5, **“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”** What did David mean with this imagery? Surely, he meant more than sitting down to a fine meal of lamb chops and mashed potatoes. The picture is one of victory and inner peace. How could David muster an appetite, much less eat when surrounded by enemies, unless he were certain of God’s presence, God’s power, and God’s protection. But through faith, He was certain of these realities. And He had every reason for such certainty. For we read in 2 Samuel 8:14, **“The LORD gave David victory wherever he went.”**

Tell me, isn’t David’s LORD our LORD? And has our LORD changed in any way? Has He become smaller, weaker, more limited, less interested? No. **“I the LORD do not change,”** He declares in Malachi 3:6. And if this is true, why should you and I fear our enemies, whether they go by the name Philistine or ISIS, Troubled Marriage or Coronavirus? Like David, we have absolutely no reason to fear and no reason to surrender. Like David, we need not run from our problems. With the LORD as our shepherd we can confront our problems and run toward our challenges, shouting a challenge similar to David’s: ‘You come against me; but I come against you in the name of the LORD God Almighty.’

David’s life was the context of Psalm 23. But then, our lives are also the context of this beautiful psalm: our lives, our hurts, our pains, our disappointments, our losses. And it is the *personal* nature of Psalm 23—our personal relationship with God and His personal shepherding of us—that moves us to cherish this psalm and to commit it to memory and to flee to its precious promises amid the most difficult and anguishing circumstances of our lives: when we feel lost and alone; when we face illness and death; when we are betrayed by the glittering promises of this world, or when we succumb to weakness and temptation. **“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”**

How personal is Psalm 23? Personal enough for the personal pronouns I, ME, and MY to occur sixteen times in six verses. When you read Psalm 23, don’t merely think of David. Think of yourself. Insert yourself into the psalm. For this is surely what the Spirit of God wants you to do. Verse 1: **“The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want.”** Verse 2: **“He makes me to lie down. He leads me.”** Verse 3: **“He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths.”** Verse 4: **“Though I walk through**

**the valley. I will fear no evil. You are with me. Your rod and staff, they comfort me.** Verse 5: **“You prepare a table before me. My enemies. My head. My cup.** And verse 6: **“Goodness and mercy shall follow me. I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”**

How can we think that God doesn't care about us as individuals or that God isn't personally involved in our lives, needs, and problems? How personal was the cross for Jesus Christ; the cross by which He atoned for all our sins? **“I am the good shepherd,”** said Jesus in John 10:14; **“I know My sheep and My sheep know Me.”** The Greek word used for KNOW in this verse, GINOSKŌ refers to personal knowledge, not merely intellectual knowledge.

And for Jesus, I would hasten to add, a HURT KNOWEDGE of our sins and suffering. As Isaiah wrote: **“But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all,”** Isaiah 53:5-6. All our iniquity laid on Jesus. Oh, He knows us fully this way, too.

The beautiful imagery of Psalm 23 is suggestive of many spiritual blessings in our lives. The *green pastures and still waters* remind us of the spiritual nourishment we receive through the holy Scriptures. The *restored soul* reminds us of the rest and rejuvenation we receive from that same word of God, and how in Jesus Christ we obtain the strength to press on day after day, problem after problem.

*Paths of righteousness* remind us of how God alone leads us in the right paths; whether the path is the way to be saved or the way to live. For we would never find the right path or walk the right path on our own.

*Walking through the valley of the shadow of death* reminds us that our faithful God is always with us in both peaks and valleys, in life and death. But don't take my word for it. Take His. God is the One who states in Hebrews 13:5, **“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”** Or in the words of the hymnist: “Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes. Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies. Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee. In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.”

The *rod and staff*: God's protection and correction. The *table prepared in the presence of enemies*: the inner peace and outer calm that come from knowing that if God is for us, no one and no thing can be against. The *head anointed with oil*: how God has chosen us and set us apart as His very own—as Simon Peter stated in his First Epistle, **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,**

**a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light,” 1 Peter 2:9.**

The *cup that runs over*: the bountiful way in which God blesses us. The *goodness and mercy that follow*: the only thing that can happen when God is leading the way. And finally, the *dwelling in the house of the Lord forever*: the certain outcome of every Christian’s faith and life. **“In My Father’s house are many mansions,”** said Jesus in John 14:2; **“if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.”**

All of these wondrous blessings are ours, dear friends. But understand that they only come to us in one way and from one source: the LORD. This is why the first verse of Psalm 23 is the most important verse in Psalm 23; and the source of every other verse and every other blessing in the psalm.

Miss this emphasis, and you’ll miss the most glorious, comforting aspect of this cherished psalm. For the LORD is the emphasis throughout Psalm 23. Notice. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads. He protects. He corrects. He goes before, so that goodness and mercy must follow. He anoints. He prepares the bountiful table. This is the way the LORD shepherds; and He shepherds this way because He is the LORD.

One of the first songs I learned as a child was *I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb*, Hymn #648 in our Lutheran hymnal. I can still remember the kindergarten teacher mouthing the words in a church service, while exaggerating the tempo: “I am Jesus’ little lamb. Ever glad at heart I am.” Yes, we teach these words to our children. But don’t ever think of the words as childish. They are not childish. They are the essence of a childlike faith; that simple faith which embraces God as the Good Shepherd, who faithfully and compassionately leads us through all the changes in our lives—changes in circumstances, changes in health, changes in finances and location—until we dwell at last **“in the house of the LORD forever.”** Having the right shepherd means everything. And that right shepherd is the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible contains many names for God; and each name describes some important aspect of His divine nature. When Abraham faced the human impossibility of fathering a child in his old age, God revealed Himself by the name EL SHADDAI, God Almighty; that is, the God for whom nothing is impossible. When Hagar, Sarah’s servant, was lost and alone in the wilderness, God revealed Himself by the name BE-ER LAHAI ROI; literally, “The God Who Sees Me.” Remember this name for God when you feel lost, alone, helpless, and afraid. “The God Who Sees Me”—no matter where I am, no matter what my circumstances.

And in Psalm 23, a psalm that describes the way in which God shepherds us through life, God reveals Himself by the name LORD; a name usually placed in capital letters. The Hebrew name is YAVEH, or more commonly, JEHOVAH. Psalm 23:1 is literally, “JEVOVAH is my shepherd.” JEVOVAH is actually a Hebrew verb, and it means “I AM.”

This is the one name for God perhaps more than any other that emphasizes the lasting, eternal nature of His faithfulness. He is the one and only shepherd who will never forsake us. He is the one and only shepherd who will lead us to green pastures, through deep valleys, to eternal life. He is the one and only shepherd who will remain faithful to us, even when we wander away from Him.

It is because this JEHOVAH is our shepherd that we can confidently say, “**I shall not want.**” Do we fully comprehend what this means? It means that no burden is unbearable, no marriage is irreconcilable, no sin is unforgivable, no godly goal is unattainable, no ministry is undoable—if the LORD is our shepherd. Of course, it also means that if anyone or anything else other than the LORD is my shepherd, I cannot make such a claim. “This is my insurance policy; I shall not want.” “This is my stock portfolio; I shall not want.” “This is the sum total of all my human righteous; I shall not want.” Foolishness.

I can think of no more fitting summary to this message on Psalm 23 than the words of that hymn I learned so long ago: “I am Jesus’ little lamb. Ever glad at heart I am. For my Shepherd gently guides me. Knows my need and well provides me. Loves me every day the same. Even calls me by my name.”