

Psalms for All Seasons

Week 2 Sermon – Psalm 23-The Shepherd’s Psalm

Main Argument- The Lord is the good shepherd and He loves, protects, guides, and cares for His flock through any and all seasons.

Last week we began an adventure in the book of Psalms. And together we’re learning that the book of Psalms is a book for all seasons of life.

Introduction

For thousands of years, the people of God have SUNG about their faith, writing tens of thousands of songs. Some record the great things God has done. Others are prayers of humble confession. Some are popular for a short time and then are forgotten. Others like "Amazing Grace" and "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" have become classics sung on many continents in many languages, over many, many years.

And-of all the songbooks ever written, the book of the Bible known as Psalms is the most famous. This collection of 150 songs has given inspiration to the people of God for several millennia and has been used more consistently in worship than any other portion of the Bible. The Psalms have been this POPULAR for this long because they enable us to accurately express our true feelings when it comes to life and our relationship with God: feelings of praise, fear, reassurance, doubt, anger, comfort, victory, and faith.

For this reason, Philip Yancey describes the Psalms as, "a spiritual medicine cabinet" that you can refer to in order to deal with any issue in life. ("Read two Psalms and call me in the morning.") To this day many editions of the New Testament include the Psalms-as if they represent an INDISPENSABLE core of our faith. These lyrics are that precious to us.

Among literary scholars, poetry scholars, and Bible scholars, Psalm 23 is regarded as the single greatest piece of literature ever written. And among Christians, Psalm 23 may be the most encouraging and most frequently memorized chapter of all time.

Its six sentences are recited at more bedsides and gravesides, in every season, than any others. ("Personalized" Psalm 23 at funerals)

I want to show it to you today from the KSV translation, because this is the version you’ll likely be familiar with. Take your Bibles and let us read it’s familiar-COMFORTING-words together:

The title tells us this is...*A Psalm of David*. David writes:

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

David's poem consists of seven simple statements.

David begins by telling us he has everything he needs (because he has the Lord). He concludes by telling us, because of this, he will have everything he needs, *forever*.

In the second and sixth statements, he has all the food and drink he needs. In the third and fifth statements, he has all the peace and security he needs. In the exact middle of the poem, he says, **"So even in my darkest moments, I will not fear."**

This is a poem to learn from, and live by. Let this song sink into your soul. Because if the Lord is *your* shepherd – you will have no wants, including food and drink and security and peace, so you will never have to fear, but face the world with faith and hope, and the world-to-come with anticipation.

Let's walk through it together.

David writes as a Middle Easterner. Westerners think like individuals. We think, "me, my, and I." Easterners think like a community. They think, "We, ours, and us." When they see the eleven, "I," "me" and "mys" in this poem, they see themselves not alone, but in the middle of a flock, in the middle of a community. Yes, these promises here are for "me," but they are promises for all of us. All of us get to experience this life with the shepherd.

I don't know if you realize it or not but this psalm has been memorized more than any passage of Scripture, other than the Lord's Prayer. Charles Haddon Spurgeon called it "the pearl of psalms." Alexander Maclaren said, "This psalm has dried many tears and supplied the mold into which many hearts have poured their peaceful faith." Ministers like myself have used its words to comfort people who are going through severe personal trials, suffering illness, or facing death. In fact the words of this psalm have been the last that many people have uttered in this life. Max Lucado writes, "In these lines sailors have found a harbor, the frightened have found a father, and strugglers have found a friend."

Now-why do you think it is that this PARTICULAR Psalm so beloved? Well, I believe it is because the entire song is built around the profound truth of its first five words: **"THE LORD is my Shepherd."** This first lyric expresses the fact that God HIMSELF stands ready to lead and guide us through life. And-don't let that last sentence to pass through your

mind like nothing more than a popular religious cliché. Allow this truth of those five precious words sink in to the depths of your soul this morning!

In fact, let me see if I can help you to understand anew just how wonderful those familiar words really are. The Hebrew here that we translate as, "the Lord" is "Jehovah" or "Jahweh" and is the loftiest, most respected title a Jew could utter. The Hebrews stood in awe before it. In fact, it was so holy that they substituted some lesser title for God whenever it occurred in their public reading of sacred Scripture. You see, "Jehovah" means "the I AM." It refers to the self-existent being-He Who is timeless-Who was and is and is to come, Who inhabits eternity, Who has life in Himself. In F. B. Meyers' commentary on this text he says,

"...all other life, from the aphid to the rose-leaf, to the archangel before the throne, is dependent and derived. All others waste and change and grow old; [GOD] only is unchangeably the same. All others are fires, which He supplies with fuel; He alone is self-sustained. THIS MIGHTY BEING IS OUR SHEPHERD!"

Think about it. Though God creates, He was never created. Though He makes, He was never made. Though he causes, He was never caused. As Psalm 90:2 says, "Before the mountains were born, You brought forth the earth and the world. From everlasting to everlasting You are God." God doesn't check the weather; He makes it. He doesn't defy gravity; He created it. He isn't affected by health; He has no body. And since He has no body-He has no limitations. He is as equally active over in Malaysia as He is here in Boyce, Virginia. Lucado writes, "Counselors can comfort you IN the storm, but you need a God Who can STILL the storm. Friends can hold your hand at your deathbed, but you need a Yahweh Who has defeated the grave. Philosophers can debate the meaning of life, but you need a Lord Who can declare the meaning of life. You need a God Who can place 100 billion stars in our galaxy and 100 billion galaxies in the universe. You need a God Who can shape two fists of flesh into 75 to 100 billion nerve cells, each with as many as 10,000 connections to other nerve cells, place it in a skull, and call it a brain. And you need a God Who, while so mind-numbingly mighty, can come in the soft of night and touch you with the tenderness of an April snow."

Now, do you begin to grasp the wonderful message that is found in these first five words? The fact that God-the only Being in the universe with this power and tender love wants to lead our lives DOES bring us deep comfort no matter what we face.

So the theme of this much beloved Psalm is this: because THE LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want for anything-I shall lack nothing! Or, as a little girl once put it as she misquoted these first few words, "The Lord is my Shepherd, that's all I want."

David's opening line summarizes the whole song:

23 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

When the Lord is my Shepherd, all my wants are taken care of.

Now I want to point out that the word, "Shepherd." is an amazing word to associate with God because in Israel, a shepherd's work was considered the lowest of all works. I mean, if a family needed a shepherd, it was always the youngest son-like David-who got this unpleasant assignment. You see, shepherds had to live with the sheep twenty-four hours a day and the task of caring for them was unending. If you were a shepherd, you never clocked out. Day and night, summer and winter, in fair weather and foul, they labored to nourish, guide, and protect the sheep of their flock. So, no one in his right mind would CHOOSE to be a shepherd. But David says that Jehovah-GOD-the GREAT I AM has made this choice. He has stooped to take just such "24-7" care of you and me.

And not only does the Old Testament proclaim this truth-the New Testament records that, as God in the flesh, Jesus applied this title to Himself. Remember, our Lord called Himself, "the Good Shepherd....Who willingly laid His life down for His sheep." Well, this morning, I would like us to draw comfort from all the IMPLICATIONS of this amazing truth. And the first is this. **Since the Lord is our shepherd is we shall not want...**

1. ...for PEACE.

Now-this is something that you and I desperately need because these days we almost never at peace. We are constantly anxious: about our bills-about our children-about our health-about our jobs. There has NEVER been a more stress-ridden society than ours. Did you know that panic anxiety is the number one mental-health problem for women in the US and in men it is second only to substance abuse? Stress-the absence of peace-has become a way of life. It is the rule rather than the exception for most Americans, especially those who live here in Clarke County, Virginia.

Well, one result of all this stress is a MALADY that has spread across our culture. Let me share with you some sobering statistics and see if you can guess what I am referring to.

- < This disorder afflicts 70 million Americans and is blamed for 38,000 deaths every year.
- < Annually it costs the U.S. \$70 billion worth of productivity.
- < Studies show that 64% of teens blame this illness for poor school performance.
- < Middle-agers face it. Researchers say the most severe cases occur between ages thirty and forty.
- < Senior citizens are afflicted by it. One study suggests that the condition impacts 50% of the over sixty five population.
- < Treatments involve everything from mouth guards to herbal teas to medication.

Any ideas what we are talking about here? It's INSOMNIA. Thanks to our lack of peace and all the subsequent anxiety that plagues our lives-America can't get to sleep. We are all physically tired. When was the last time you woke up and felt rested? In an effort to deal with the symptoms of this problem Americans like you and me consume thirty tons of aspirins, sleeping pills, and tranquilizers every day!

You know, as Max Lucado reminds us, only one other living creature has as much trouble resting as we do: not dogs-they doze, not bears-they of course hibernate. Cats

invented the catnap and sloths snooze twenty hours a day. Most animals have enough sense to know how to rest-with one exception: SHEEP! For sheep to sleep, everything must be right: no predators, no tension in the flock, no bugs in the air attacking them, no hunger in the belly. Everything has to be just so before they can rest. But they can't take care of all these worries on their own. This is where the shepherd comes in. He finds the best pasture-one with no poisonous plants and plenty of water. Shepherds anoint their sheep's heads with oil that acts as a repellent to keep pesky insects away. They even scour the pasture to find snake holes and then they encircle the mouths of these holes with oil so the snakes can't get out and hurt their flock. Even then as the psalm says, they have to take each sheep's head in their hand and make them lie down-forcing them to FOCUS on him. This calms them and they can finally rest.

Well God taught David, the shepherd king, that it is the same with you and me. In order for us to have peace, we must learn to focus on our mighty Shepherd/Provider instead of on our problems. This is what Isaiah 26:3 means when it says, "He will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee." This is what David was talking about in Psalm 3:3 when he said that God was the "lifter of his head." In other words David relied on God to lift his focus from the problems all around him to God's limitless power and provision. You know-when I start to feel like a sheep in this sense-when anxiety builds in my mind, this Psalm and the protection my Shepherd provides often comes to mind.

To me this is sort of a "lullaby" that helps me to turn my DOWNWARD focus on the worries of the day UP so that I can focus on the power of my Shepherd-a Shepherd Who always does MORE than meet my needs-Who ALWAYS fills my cup to overflowing.

I like the way Hadden Robinson expresses this truth. He writes: "With [GOD] the calf is always the FATTED calf, the robe is always the BEST robe, the joy is UNSPEAKABLE, and the peace PASSES understanding. There is no grudging when it comes to God's goodness. He does not measure His goodness by drops like a druggist filling a prescription. It comes to us in floods."

So, you see, as the words to this song say, worry IS needless, with such a Savior, our Shepherd Who says, "Come TO ME, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let our hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27)

The next time you feel anxiety building, read the words of this 23rd Psalm-and instead of focusing on how you are going to pay the mortgage or feed your family or deal with all those problems that are constantly attacking like a swarm of insects, stop and focus on your Almighty Shepherd: the Prince of Peace who, as Paul says, "can do exceedingly abundantly beyond all you ask or think." (Ephesians 3:20). If you do that, I promise you will sleep better at night!

And then David says that because the Lord is our Shepherd...

2. ...we shall not want for GUIDANCE.

Now, I think another reason that God inspired this comparison of us to sheep is because of all the animals He created-the species that most NEEDS guidance is sheep. They also cannot see very well-less than 15 yards. And-unlike cats and dogs they have no sense of direction and so they get lost easily-even in the familiar environment of their own territory. So as it says in verse 3, they need Someone to "LEAD THEM ON PATHS THAT ARE RIGHT."

Sheep can't find food or water on their own. This is because, unlike most animals, sheep have no keen sense of smell. In fact, if left on their own, sheep tend to wander into running creeks and then their wool grows heavy and they drown: hence their need for someone to guide them to STILL, QUIET, CALM WATER like David said in verse 2. Sheep have no natural defense: no claws, no horns, no fangs, not even a stink bag like a skunk. So, they are basically helpless and, like David say in verse 4, they need a guiding, guarding, shepherd with a rod and a staff to protect them.

A shepherd's rod is a 2 ½ foot club, usually carved out of a piece of wood with a knot in the end. The shepherd would imbed pieces of iron in it to add strength and weight to the knot. Think of a mace, but made out of wood.

Wolves and bears are taller than sheep, so the shepherd can hurl his club over the backs of the sheep to knock the predator in the head. Up-close, this club is a formidable weapon.

A shepherd's staff, or "crook" was just what you've seen in the pictures: a long stick with a curve on the end of it. The shepherd climbs with it, and can use it to direct the sheep, who huddle around him. It's long enough to reach and guide the closest sheep in the right direction. It's usually five feet long, and the shepherd is never without it.

When a lamb can't scramble down from a ledge or falls into a crevice, the shepherd uses his staff to catch him by the leg or shoulder and gently lift it back onto the path.

The rod is for protecting the flock from external threats. The staff is for directing the flock in its daily grazing. The sight of these two tools *comforts* the sheep.

And-no insult intended. I mean you and I are in the same boat here-but sheep on the whole are pretty DUMB animals. If left to themselves, they will eat poisonous weeds and die and when one sheep does this the others will follow the leader and before long the entire flock is belly up.

All this points to the fact that-sheep need moment by moment guidance in order to survive. Well, the uncomfortable truth is we are like that. As Isaiah 53:6 says all of us like sheep, "...have gone astray...each of us has turned to his own way." Every day we are faced with countless decisions-and most of the time we foolishly yield to our sinful nature and make the wrong ones. Like stupid sheep we repeat the mistakes of our peers. If you doubt this, then just watch the evening news one night and count how many stories

concern people who went astray-people who made poor decisions because they went down a wrong-and well-trodden path.

So, "wayward woollies" like you and me need a Shepherd-to lovingly guide and protect us in life. Well, that is what David says we have here in this much loved psalm. God Almighty yearns to direct us along the right path and this is GREAT because as Isaiah 28:29 says, "The Lord of hosts...is WONDERFUL in counsel and EXCELLENT in guidance." He knows everything there is to know about any path that has ever been or ever will be.

You know, the Bible defines God in terms of three OMNI'S. God is OMNIPOTENT, OMNIPRESENT, and OMNISCIENT. These three words mean that God is all-powerful-all-present (in other words there is no place that God is not-and all-knowing. And when I say, "all-knowing" I mean God has COMPLETE knowledge. What this word means is that God knows EVERYTHING. No question can confound Him. No dilemma can confuse Him. No event can surprise Him. He has eternal, intrinsic, comprehensive, and absolutely PERFECT knowledge. In short, nothing is news to God. As Hebrews 4:13 puts it, "All things are naked and open to the eyes of God." This means that God knows everything there is to know about YOU. There isn't a single motivation, thought, act, or word that has slipped out of your being that has escaped the undivided attention of God. He knows which way is best for you to turn when you come to any crossroad in life-whether it concerns your career or your marriage or your children or your health. Doesn't it comfort you to know you can have that caliber of guidance at your disposal?!

So-since THE LORD is our Shepherd-all the days of our lives-we will not want for peace or guidance-but then David goes a step further and reminds us that when our lives END...

3.we shall not want for an ETERNAL HOME.

He says, we will "dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Now, as I said, earlier, this particular Psalm is frequently requested at funerals. These beloved words are quoted at the grave-sides of paupers, and carved on the headstones of kings. Those who know nothing of the Bible know this part of the Bible. People who quote no Scripture can remember this verse about the valley and the shadow and the shepherd. Why? Because as David reminds us in this psalm, we all know that we have to face death. As Hebrews 9:27 says, "Everyone must die once and after that be judged by God."

Now-we'd like to change a word or two of that verse. We'd like it to say, "NEARLY everyone must die." or "Everyone but ME must die." or "Everyone who forgets to eat right and exercise and take his vitamins must die." But this is not what God says in His book. ALL of us die. Ecclesiastes 7:2 puts it this way, "We all must die and everyone living should think about this."

This is why in the only Psalm attributed to him, Moses prayed, "God, teach us how short our lives really are so that we may be wise." (Psalm 90:12) So, if we are wise we will remember the brevity of life. Exercise may buy us a few more heartbeats. Medicine may

grant us a few more breaths. But in the end-there IS an end. That is terrifying news but thankfully God has used David to remind us that we don't have to face that end alone. If we let Him, God and God alone can and will guide us through the valley of the shadow of death. ("Last Times")

Years ago a chaplain in the French army used the 23rd Psalm to encourage soldiers before battle. He would urge them to repeat the opening clause of the psalm, ticking it off, one finger at a time. The little finger represented the word, THE; the ring finger represented the word LORD; the middle finger IS; the index finger MY; and the thumb, SHEPHERD. Then he asked every soldier to write the words on the palm of his hand and to repeat the verse whenever he needed strength. This chaplain placed special emphasis on the message of the index finger, MY. He reminded the soldiers that God is a PERSONAL shepherd with a PERSONAL mission-to get them home safely. Well a few days later after a fierce battle one of the young soldiers was found dead, and his right hand was still clutching the index finger of the left. As his life ended he clung to this comforting truth, "The Lord is MY Shepherd."

And this brings us to a very important aspect of this popular psalm. You see to experience the PEACE that God gives-to benefit from the GUIDANCE He offers...to have His assurance that death is NOT the end-we must know the Shepherd personally. He must be OUR Shepherd. And, we only enter into this PERSONAL relationship with God through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. Thanks to our sin that separates us from His loving but holy presence, there is no other way. This is why God sent His only Son into the world-to be the sacrificial LAMB for all mankind. In dying on the cross, Jesus took our sins on Himself and because He did we can pray to God and ask Him to forgive us of our sin-to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, and to come into our lives as Lord and Shepherd. In that simple prayer we come to KNOW the Shepherd personally. The familiar words of this psalm take on their true meaning because He becomes OUR Shepherd.

Invitation

This morning do you know the Shepherd? Now-make sure you understand my question. I didn't ask if you knew ABOUT the Shepherd. I asked whether or not you KNEW Him. If you don't then hear this: HE WANTS TO KNOW YOU! Even now He stands at the door of your life, knocking, asking to come in. He won't force you to enter into His fold. That is your decision. Won't you decide today to open the door and follow Jesus as your Lord and Savior and Shepherd? And if you do KNOW the Shepherd-if you are a Christian-then perhaps today our Good Shepherd is saying to you, "You need to stop focusing on your problems. You need to let Me lift your head so you can focus on My power and provision and then REST and have the PEACE that only I can bring." He may be cautioning you to stop living according to the world's guidance systems and let Him truly LEAD your through life.