



Understanding & Responding to Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is probably the most famous Psalm in the Bible and for good reason. This Psalm has for centuries been a source of comfort, strength and hope.

The first funeral I vividly remember was for my granddad, my dad's dad. As a little kid, I remember it like it was yesterday. It was the first time I saw my dad cry. After the funeral, I remember sitting on the floor in my grandmother's house, writing out Psalm 23 on a piece of paper.

Then when I was in college, I preached my first funeral. It was my grandmother on my mom's side and her favorite Psalm was Psalm 23. It had been a real comfort to her when her husband, my grandfather on Mom's side, passed away a few years before her. So it was just natural that I would preach her funeral from Psalm 23.

Then I remember living in New Orleans right after my dad unexpectedly died and I was asked to preach on Psalm 23. I remember reflecting on God's grace in the middle of grief.

I think about a church member, Casey Black, who was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Within about a month they took him in for surgery to remove it. When they opened up his stomach, they realized the cancer had spread everywhere. There was literally nothing they could do so they just closed him back up. When he woke up, they said, "We're sorry—there's nothing we can do." He was journaling a couple weeks before he died and this is what he wrote in his journal, "I was diagnosed with stomach cancer and now they say it's spread to my liver, lymph nodes and lungs. If I didn't know the Lord, I would probably be scared. But instead I have such peace. Psalm 23 sums it up."

So what is it about Psalm 23 that brings such peace, hope, strength and sustenance throughout generations of God's people in history? Let's meditate on it in the abbreviated time we have left. Let's do what we've done over the last couple weeks and soak in what God's Word says.

Let me start with prayer.

O God, we only have a short time left, but I pray that in the next few minutes, as we meditate on Your Word together, that You would speak powerfully and supernaturally to us, that we might experience the peace, hope and strength Your people have experienced literally for centuries through this Psalm. I pray that some people today might experience new life in Jesus. It's in His name we pray. Amen.

All right, we're going to do what we've done the last couple weeks. We're going to read this psalm, then spend a couple minutes meditating on it. I hope this is helping and encouraging you in your

time alone with God's Word. I've been talking with different people about how they're experiencing a fresh start to their faith and new intimacy with God through meditating on His Word on their own. That is what I long for you.

Literally, as your pastor, I want nothing more for each one of you than that you would know and experience intimacy with God. I know that when that happens, that's life changing, marriage changing, family changing, work changing—and I would argue, world changing for you and everybody you come into contact with.

Let's read Psalm 23 together, then meditate on it.

*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.
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.*

Let's do this. I want everybody to join in, from the youngest to the oldest. If you've been a Christian in the church for decades, or if this is your first time ever in the church and you're not a Christian, I invite you to take just a few minutes right now to make notes on what sticks out to you in this Psalm. Does anything repeat. Are there words or phrases that stand out? How does this Psalm develop? What does it teach us about God and ourselves? Take just take a couple minutes to make a few notes or observations, then I'll bring us back together. By the way, a psalm is a song or a prayer to God or about God.



All right, let's come back together. That's not enough time as there's so much here that we could set aside the rest of the day to soak in this one. But we don't have the rest of the day, so let me show you a couple things you may or may not have noticed that are breathtaking and life changing.

Start in verse one where it says, "*The LORD...*" I hope you recognize that it has small caps. This is the covenant name for God, the One Who always was, is and always will be, the God over all the

universe. King David, who is writing this Psalm, says, “This God is my Shepherd.” I think we can just think about those two words for the rest of our time. What does that mean: my Shepherd?

Let’s start with “my.” Did you notice how often in this Psalm the first-person pronoun is used? I, me, my—let’s count them. *“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.”* That’s five. *“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. 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.”* That makes ten.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” Seventeen times he uses a personal pronoun. And the point, I think, is clear. David is saying, “The Lord is not just a Shepherd—the Lord is my Shepherd.” This immediately leads to the question for every single one of us in this gathering: do you know God like this? Right where you are sitting, do you know God personally like this?

The good news of Psalm 23 is you can know God like this. God. Not just this guy or girl over here, but God. Not only can you know Him, but God wants you to know Him like this, to experience Him like this, as the Shepherd of your life. You say, “What does that mean?” Obviously we’re at a disadvantage because very few of us are shepherds with real sheep. Most of us probably don’t know any shepherds, so we only have an idea of what a shepherd does, but it’s not very concrete in our minds.

There’s good news here for the non-shepherds among us, including me, because this Psalm lists all kinds of things that God does for us as Shepherd. Let’s list them. I can count at least ten things David says the Lord does for me as my Shepherd.

Here in verse one, *“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”* He satisfies my wants. I shall not want means I shall not be in lack. Obviously it doesn’t mean He gives me everything I want. That wouldn’t be good, just like it wouldn’t be good for me to give my kids everything they want. Not everything they want is good for them. The wording here is literally, “I shall not lack.”

Think about the context of the Psalm. David is talking about walking through the valley of the shadow of death and being in the presence of his enemies. When you walk through difficult days, it’s because you’re lacking something. When you walk through grief, it’s because you lack fellowship with somebody you love. When you walk through disease or sickness, it’s because you lack good health. When you walk through difficulty in your family, it’s because you lack what you once had or what you always wanted to have.

Suffering is associated with lacking something. I think about Job in Job 1:21 when he says, *“The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away.”* He’s lacking something. So how can David say he’s not in lack? Here’s the beauty in what Psalm 23 is teaching. Even when the Lord takes away, the Lord never stops giving. What I’ve discovered in times of pain and loss is that when I’m lacking something or

someone—amidst the difficulties we saw this last week in Psalm 13, even in those moments when the pain pierces your heart—in those moments the peace God gives is most real and most needed. It's those moments when the confusion and despair are overwhelming that God says, "I will give you wisdom." It's when you're at the end of yourself and you don't know if you can go on, that God will speak and say, "When you are weak, I am strong." Your Shepherd never stops giving and will never stop giving so that you can say, "I shall not want."

Keep reading. "*He makes me lie down in green pastures.*" So the second thing my Shepherd does is He gives me rest. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He calms my anxious soul. How many of us struggle with anxiety at so many different levels? We could talk all day long about each one of these needs, but the picture here is the Lord as your Shepherd wants to replace your anxiety with His peace. That's what it means for Him to be a Shepherd.

"*He leads me beside still waters... He leads me in paths of righteousness.*" These are parallel phrases. As Shepherd, He leads my path. God doesn't just say, "Go this way. Do this thing," leaving you to figure it out on your own. No, He leads you beside quiet waters and in paths of righteousness.

And, "*He restores my soul.*" What a phrase! Just let that soak in. Are you broken? The Lord repairs. Are you hurting? The Lord heals. Do you feel dirty? The Lord makes clean. Do you feel guilty? The Lord forgives.

Did you notice that it's your Shepherd Who does all these things? He makes you. He leads you. He restores you. All these are things He is doing. Isn't it good to know that in difficult times, it's not your ability that gets you through, but His? When you walk through difficulty, when you don't have the strength, the grace of your Shepherd will get you through.

"*For his name's sake.*" Ah, we could talk all day about this. I know I've said that before, but we really could. Get the picture here. God has bound up the glory and honor of His name by showing Himself in all these ways. The Lord's name is *Jehovah Jireh*, which means He is committed to showing Himself as your Provider. The Lord's name is *Jehovah Shalom*, which means He is committed to showing Himself as your Peace. The Lord's name is *Jehovah Rapha*, which means He is committed to showing Himself as your Healer and Restorer. The Lord will be true to His name in your life, particularly in the hardest times.

Verse four, "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...*" Why? "*For you are with me.*" So the fifth thing the Lord does as my Shepherd is He removes my fears. How? With His presence. He does not ever, ever, ever leave me alone. Notice the shift here in verse four. Up until this point, David has been talking about the Lord as his Shepherd. But in verse four, he talks to the Lord as his Shepherd. Instead of using, "He does this, He does that," for the first time he says, "*I will fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff...*" He could have said, "For God is with me; his rod and his staff, they comfort me." But that's not what he says. He changes and speaks to the Lord.

I think he's expressing here what every one of us knows. It's easy to talk about God when we're walking in green pastures and beside quiet waters. But when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death or in the middle of darkness, it's less talking about God and more crying out to God. It's not just a need for truth about God. Yes, it's that. But it's a need for help from God—and God promises to help. Our Shepherd never leaves His sheep alone. David says, "If my Shepherd is with me, I have nothing to fear." When you know the Lord is with you in every moment as your Shepherd, you have nothing to fear—not even death, which we'll come back to at the end.

Keep going. Number six, as my Shepherd, the Lord "*comforts me*" with His provision, with His rod and His staff. This is a picture of His guidance, protection and discipline that are a comfort, to keep us safe even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Then the image shifts when you get to verse five: "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*" How awesome is this? As your Shepherd, the Lord serves you. This is talking about God preparing a table for you—even in the presence of your enemies. The Lord doesn't just sustain you enough so you can barely get through. The Lord satisfies you.

And He honors you by anointing your head with oil so your cup overflows. That's a picture of being set apart as an honored guest. The cup is filled to overflowing. As your Shepherd, the Lord serves you and honors you. The Lord serves and honors you—when you're surrounded by those who against you.

Then in verse six, "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*" Ah, that's a good word, follow. He pursues you with His love, goodness and mercy. Here's the deal. When you hear "follow," that can be a bit misleading, because you might picture the Lord kind of lagging along behind you. If you're going to follow somebody, you kind of stay behind them. You don't want to be too creepy, so you keep a little distance between you and them when you're following someone. Or maybe when you're playing outside with your kids and it's time to go inside, you tell them to follow you inside to get cleaned up, then they might slowly start to follow in that direction. I think that's often how we think about God's love, that it's kind of lagging behind us. He's with us, but maybe a step behind. Sometimes He's a little hard to see, but that's not the imagery here. The word "follow" here is an active and all-out pursuit.

It's like when I first saw Heather and decided, "I'm going to pursue her." There were obstacles in the way—most notably, another guy—but that was not going to stop me. I was in an active, all-out pursuit, not lagging behind, forging ahead, so when she finally turned from him, I would be right there.

The psalmist David says this is what God's love is like in your life. His love is not lagging behind you; His love overtaking you. Wherever you are, His love is pursuing you. When you wake up tomorrow morning, know that His love is pursuing you. Let the first thought in your mind tomorrow be this: "I have to turn off that alarm clock." But then immediately think, "The God of the universe is pursuing me right

now.” It will change your day if you really believe this. Then when you walk through every moment you face, you know you can never get away from the goodness and mercy of God.

Isn’t it really good news, when we sin and wander from our Shepherd, to know that He still pursues us with His goodness and mercy? Or when we doubt God, to know that He still pursues us with His goodness and mercy?

I am assuming in a gathering this size, there are many people who, if you were honest, are distant from God right now, maybe have been wandering from God, maybe are having a hard time trusting in God. I just want you to know right now, based on His Word, that He’s brought you here to hear that He loves you, and that His goodness and mercy are yours. You say, “I don’t deserve it.” That’s the whole point—it’s “mercy.”

This leads to the last picture. As your Shepherd, he guarantees your eternity forever with Him, in His house. There’s so much here. Let me just summarize this Psalm by saying that we don’t deserve this kind of relationship with God as our Shepherd. None of us do. We’ve all sinned against God. We like sheep have all gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way, the Bible says in Isaiah 53:6. We deserve God’s judgment, not God’s mercy. But the good news of the Bible is that God has been true to His word to love you and me as a Shepherd, so much so that God came to us in Jesus.

I want you to hear Jesus’ words in John 10:11: *“I am the good shepherd.”* And the good Shepherd does what? He lays down His life for the sheep. Psalm 23? Jesus says, “I am that Shepherd.” Jesus is God in the flesh Who came to pay the price for our sin—for your sin, for my sin. That’s why He died on the cross. He laid down His life so that we could be restored to relationship with God as Shepherd. Jesus came to make Psalm 23 a reality for you and for me right now. There’s nothing more important in your life than to know the Lord as your Shepherd.

I mentioned Casey Black earlier, diagnosed with stomach cancer, journaling days before he died, saying, “I have such peace.” Psalm 23 sums it up. I remember walking into his hospital room, knowing he was about to die, not knowing what to say. What do you say in those situations? “I’m so sorry. I wish this wasn’t happening.” Well, I and others who walked into Casey’s hospital room that day got a surprise when we walked in the door. Here was a man, sitting on that bed, literally in the valley of the shadow of death—and he had a smile on his face. We walked in, he pointed up to heaven and he said, “I’m going to be with Jesus today.” Suddenly, “I’m sorry” didn’t feel like the appropriate thing to say anymore. Or, “I wish this wasn’t happening.” I actually found myself thinking, “I wish I was going with you.” And that’s the point.

When the Lord is your Shepherd, you have nothing to fear. Even the worst thing that could happen to you, death itself, has now become the best thing that could happen to you. The Bible describes heaven this way in Revelation 7:17. *“For the Lamb... ”*—talking about Jesus—*“in the midst of the throne*

will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Will you bow your head with me? I want to ask you, right where you are sitting in this moment, do you know Jesus as your Shepherd? Can you say, with joy in your heart right now, “Yes, the Lord is my Shepherd. I know Him. He’s mine.” If your heart does not resound in that way, then I want to invite you right now to put your trust in Him as your Shepherd. Pray right where you’re sitting, in your heart, “Dear God, I am a sinner. I have strayed from You, but I believe that Jesus died on a cross for me and my sin. Today, I put my trust in Him. Forgive me of all my sin and restore me to relationship with You as my Shepherd, that I might know all these things in Psalm 23 for my life and might dwell in Your house forever.”

Don’t leave this place today without knowing the kind of confidence that Casey knew. If you just prayed that to God, with our heads still bowed and eyes still closed, I want to invite you to do something. If you just said, “Yes, today I’m trusting in Jesus to restore me and reconcile me to God as my Shepherd,” would you just lift up your hand where you are as a picture of saying, “Yes, today I’m trusting Jesus.” Amen. Amen.

God, I praise You for Your goodness and mercy in how You’ve brought people today to be encouraged in all kinds of ways. I praise You particularly for these who just raised their hands to say, “Yes, today I have come to know the Lord as my Shepherd.” I pray that You would give them courage to profess that publicly, even today, through baptism. For them, and for everyone who knows You as Shepherd, we say together today, “We believe Psalm 23.” We say it in our hearts together, “You are our Shepherd. We’re so glad You are our Shepherd. So lead us, guide us, remove our fears, comfort us, strengthen us and bring us safely into eternal life with You. We love you, O Lord our Shepherd.” In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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