

A Song for Every Season – Studies in the Psalms (Part 7 of 10)

Is the Lord Enough? What it Looks Like to Trust Him

Psalm 23

Joe Bartemus

- 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. (Psalm 23)

Of all the beautiful and loved Psalms, I would guess that this Psalm takes the place of priority as the best known and honored Psalm of all time. It has a beauty and attraction that speaks in ways that can only be explained by the wonderful work of the Holy Spirit bringing the Word of God alive—even to those who do not desire to follow that Word. The Psalm is full of meaning and I think we could spend the whole summer on this Psalm alone. To help us unpack some of its depth, I want to give some background thoughts concerning this great part of the Scripture.

1. The author is David. That is a mouthful in itself. He is one of the best known characters in the Older Testament. On his resume you will find shepherd, giant killer, fearless leader, fugitive, appeared insane, faithful to God, greatest human king of Israel, sinner, forgiven...etc.
2. The setting is uncertain. One thing is certain, the context is not the serene, pastoral setting where all is well in the world and the application is don't worry be happy. The terms "valley of the shadow of death" and "prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" sound rather ominous and foreboding.
3. David may have written it during his flight from Absalom when his kingdom and life was threatened by his own son (2 Samuel 14-18). Perhaps it was written remembering the Israelites and the exodus. The people of God were like sheep in the wilderness looking for their next meal. I certainly would be comforting to the later Israelites who were deported out of their land by the Babylonians and were wondering if they would ever had a temple again or be in the "promised land" again or if God had deserted them. In any case it is a Psalm that is intended to give solid theological perspective and hope in the time of challenge in life

Three Realities That Make Trust Come to Life

In studying this Psalm, I would like to direct our thinking this morning around 3 realities that make trust come to life. The key to life is—are you ready—to know the actors and the roles they play in the drama of life.

1. The object of trust is the sovereign shepherd--23:1

As we probably all know, this Psalm starts with the verse stating that “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.” What is amazing about this short clause is the significance of the words.

First, the word **LORD** is of huge importance in the OT. Here are some significant aspects to that name that many may not know.

- a. The Hebrew word for LORD is Yahweh. That may not mean much to most English readers, but to the Jewish reader, that is huge. You can tell when Yahweh is used because the English bible used all capital letters to write the name (LORD not Lord-as in Ps. 22:30)
- b. Yahweh was never pronounced by a devout Jew. The name was holy and never crossed the lips of the faithful. They inserted another Hebrew name (Adoni) in place of Yahweh.
- c. Yahweh was the name often used in covenant contexts. Covenants between Yahweh and Israel were statements of relationship and were personal. When the personal God of Israel wanted to enter into a covenant of relationship with Israel, the name Yahweh was generally used (Exodus 20:2)
- d. Yahweh was the personal name for the god of Israel. It was not a generic deity term, but a proper name for the god of Israel alone.

All of that may sound like an academic exercise and word study, but it is very relevant to this Psalm. When David wrote this Psalm, he wanted all who read or sang it to know that he was speaking to the God who is personal and in relationship with his people—not a “far away” abstract deity who could not be approached or who did not care.

This important principle reminds me of my early days at College Park Church. I remember seeing a piano player and choir director who was very faithful and cute when we only had about 100 people in the church. I knew her as the “cute piano player”. Later as I increased in boldness, I thought it might be good to put a name with the face. I asked and found out that her name was Cathy. That name became very important to me, as I became friends with Cathy and she was more than just the cute piano player. We finally decided to take our relationship to the deepest of

personal commitment/ covenant and get married. Marriage only makes sense when it is personal, relational and committed. Then it is a beautiful thing.

Second, the word **shepherd** is very important. Israel was known as a people who raised animals (Gen. 46:32). Some ancient literature saw shepherds as being on the lower end of society, but the Bible generally sees shepherds in a good light. The shepherd metaphor suggests provider, protector, guide, etc. God is called a shepherd in this Psalm as well as in Gen. 48:15. The king is a shepherd (2 Sam. 5:2) and Jesus is the good shepherd in Jn. 10:11). Everyone needs a shepherd, but the challenging question is what kind of shepherd.”

Third, the key to this passage seems to be the word **“my”**. The LORD is MY shepherd. This little word tells us that the relational God has a personal name and is ready to be the guide and protector of his people, but the challenge is whether Yahweh was their personal God or not. To read further in the psalm and benefit from its promises required personal commitment and faith. One must be in relationship with Yahweh to be shepherded by him. When one is in personal relationship with him the first verse ends with the overarching, beautiful promise that “I shall not want” or better “I shall have my needs met”. The greatest need we have is to have a relationship with the personal God of the universe. Everybody needs the LORD all the time.

Is the LORD enough for you? Do you want to be your own shepherd sometimes? Does he really meet your needs or do you need more? He is the shepherd who truly meets our needs and any other shepherd is one who makes claims that can never fulfill our true needs. May we be those who confess and trust that the LORD is our shepherd and we need no one else.

1. Actions that Warrant Trust – Psalm 23:2-5

The Shepherd Gives Security – vs. 2-4

The next four verses in this Psalm describe what “I shall not want” means. There are four descriptive statements that show the care of the LORD for his sheep in the various times of life. Security comes not from the circumstanced, but from the presence of the shepherd.

1. **“Lie down in green pastures,... beside still waters”** This picture is like an oasis. The shepherd leads the sheep to find rest which will include sustenance-- food and water in a context that is refreshing and manageable.

2. **“Restore my soul”** The LORD supplies our physical needs and also our spiritual need of restoration. He is what restores our inner world.

3. **“Lead me in paths of righteousness”** Direction for life comes from the shepherd. The road of life can be filled with treacherous dangers, but the LORD leads his sheep in the way that is right. We will not be led astray by our shepherd

4. **“Valley of the shadow of death”** The final description of security is the most ominous one. Sheep of Yahweh are promised that they will not be deserted in the toughest times of the journey.

The picture of the “valley of the shadow of death” is probably referring to the hard desert times of life. The geographic picture could be that of a wadi. I remember in college taking a Bible geography class and hearing the weird word “wadi”. It refers to a place where a stream would flow in the times of rain, but would dry up into a deep gorge during the dry times. It was desolate and in great need of water. The metaphor is that even in the deepest and darkest of times in life—ultimately our death, our security would be the continued presence of our shepherd. The greatest words in the Psalm are this—**“YOU ARE WITH ME”**.

Two illustrations strike me when I think of this portion of the 23rd Psalm. Cathy and I have led many trip to Nicaragua with vision teams from CPC. We have a guide/translator named Evelyn who has been a gift from God. When we get to Nicaragua we are foreigners and everyone knows that. Evelyn is a local Nicaraguan. She takes care of us. I have total confidence when the police stop our bus or when the restaurant people give us a bill or when someone on the team needs medical treatment. My confidence and security is not in myself, it is because Evelyn is with us—she can figure it all out.

My second illustration is harder for me to express. In 2003, my Mom was showing some strange physical symptoms that looked like a stroke. We all were very concerned and the neurologist had her placed in the hospital to do tests. He concluded that she had a rare disease and had only a short time to live. When he told the family his diagnosis, we were devastated. I was the oldest son and had the job of telling mom the news. It was the hardest thing I ever remember doing in life. Mom had walked with God and looked forward to being in his presence, but when the time really comes, it is tough. She was not longer able to speak and I said to her, “Mom, the doctor says you do not have long to live. You are going to be with Jesus.” I tried not to break down and she let out a short cry then seemed calm. I am sure that her security was in this fact—even when she was faced with the toughest time of life, death, Jesus was with her. That is true for the LORD’s sheep even before death as we are confronted with the valleys of darkness—his rod and staff comfort us.

a. The host gives significance—23:5

The final section of this Psalm changes the metaphor and scene. No longer is the psalmist speaking of a shepherd and security. The picture moves to a house and a dining table. In the ancient near east, table and meal events could mean several things. It could be an event that follows a battle and is a victory celebration meal. It is often a statement of relationship and friendship. Sitting at table often was not primarily to eat but to commune or fellowship with your table partners. In this passage, I think both pictures may be intended. The words are important and helpful. The descriptions of this event are summarized with pictures:

1. **“You prepare a table before me”** Those at this table are secure from enemies and hunger. The host of the table is the LORD and when you are having table fellowship with him, your enemies are irrelevant. He is there and your significance comes from your identification with him and no enemy can move you from him.

2. **“You anoint my head with oil”** This could be a statement of medicinal care. Oil was used like ointment to help injuries. It was also used to indicate prestige or position. A king or priest would

be anointed to positions of honor. I think this is the meaning here. The LORD anoints his people as a way of saying you are identified with me. Your significance in life is what I declare it to be. You are with me and share in the privileges of my household. It reminds me of my summers as a teen when I worked at my Dad's foundry. He was the plant manager and hired his kids for summer help. I tried to work hard and be worth what I was paid, but I know and so did everyone else that my Dad was the boss and I was treated accordingly — thankfully that was good.

3. **“My cup overflows”** This metaphor is fairly clear. The sheep of the LORD not only have security and significance, but have that fullness of life in excess. There is no end to the love of the LORD for his people

3. Duration of trust—23:6

“Goodness and mercy will follow me” These 2 words are great covenantal words in the O.T.—particularly the word “mercy”. The Hebrew is the word *hesed* which is used frequently in the Bible. It means covenant commitment and loyalty. It is translated “mercy”, “loving-kindness”, “faithfulness”, “love” and others. The idea is that the LORD will pursue his own not matter what for all the days of our lives. The “hounds of heaven” will relentlessly pursue us. We are his and he has committed himself to us. What a wonderful thought that shows the significance the LORD places in his sheep.

“Dwell in the house of the LORD forever” What a great way to end this Psalm. There is an easy literary device used by the psalmist seen in this verse. The name “LORD” appears in verse 1 and is here again in the last verse. This technique is called “enveloping” and allows the reader to start and end in the same place. The LORD is the beginning and the end. He is the shepherd and the end is with him in his house. The final dwelling of the people of the LORD is not in close proximity to him, but in his very house. Some have mistranslated John 14 to have Jesus saying that in his father's house are many mansions as if we all get a big house close to the house of the Father. This text makes it clear. Our final destiny is not close to God, but in his very house. We are his children. My kids are all adults and when they come home, they do not knock; they just come in—because it is their house too. They are family. Our eternity (forever) is with him.

Conclusion:

There is so much truth in this Psalm. It would take forever to fully grasp it. Here are a couple of application “take-aways” for us to consider:

1. Do you see Jesus in this Psalm? It would be very helpful to work through the NT and see the pictures of Jesus in this Psalm. Let me mention a couple of them. John 10 says Jesus is the good shepherd; he knows his sheep; and he lays down his life for his sheep. This shows him as the one who has a relationship with his people. The security from Jesus is seen often Matthew 11:28, Jesus offers rest for the weary. Jesus is the water of life in John 4 and the bread of life in John 6. In I Thess. 4:16 speaks of the dead in Christ who have Jesus as their companion in death and their companion in resurrection as discussed in I Cor.15. Jesus also provides significance to us as the one who is the basis

for our justification in Romans 3:19ff. John 13, Jesus is the host of the last supper which becomes the Lord 's Supper as described by Paul in I Cor. 11. John 14 talks of his followers being in his Father's house. Jesus is the wonderful fulfillment of this great psalm for us.

2. Is Jesus enough for you? He desires a personal relationship with you. He gave his life for you. Have you trusted in him? Do you still trust him? Do you believe that if you have him, you will lack nothing? It is true—trust in him (either as Savior from sin or as the true shepherd of life)
3. Do you feel safe and secure with Jesus? Do you need health, wealth, or prosperity to feel secure. The USA tells us that we need stuff to be secure or we need relationships to make us secure. Psalm 23 says we need the LORD to make us secure and the people of God know that security in all times of life.
4. Do you look for achievement or status to be significant? Do you need success, prestige, the acclaim of others, and approval of men etc to feel worthy. Jesus give us significance. Appreciate his anointing your head with the oil of his approval. See Jesus who declares you righteous in Him. Thank him for the mercy of God that follows us. Live like one who has the right to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The bottom line of the 23rd Psalm is that the LORD is worthy of the position of shepherd in our lives. He is the only reality that we can trust fully. To trust him we need to first, acknowledge him for who he is—the great shepherd of our lives. Secondly, we should review and appreciate and trust him with every facet of life—from the good times to the bad and be secure in him. Finally, our identity is in him and that is true today and forever.

Our mission in life is to dwell in the presence (house) of God all of our lives. In eternity we will be with him physically, presently we are with him through his Spirit as we pray and read his Word. May we be igniting in ourselves and others a passion to follow Jesus!