

The Lord is my shepherd. . .
January 29, 2012 - Psalm 23

Who is God? What is He like? Your answer depends on a lot of things. Some of you may have concluded that God can't be discovered. Or if there is a God, we can't prove His existence. So you live as if there is no God. Others maybe acknowledge a deity or pray to a higher power when things get rough. But though you might affirm the reality of God in your brain, He doesn't make much difference in your ordinary life now. Many here trust the triune God of the Bible who has revealed Himself as one in essence yet in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet answering the question "what is He like" can depend on what's happening in our lives right now. If you're going through something confusing you might be questioning your understanding of God. If you're suffering, you might be asking "where is God in all this?" If you lack spiritual passion for God or you're really tired, you might say "I don't care what God is like today."

But I believe deep in our souls, there is a longing to know God. I think that many of us want to know more of what God is like. I think that the more that we know what God is like, the more likely it is that we will turn to Him rather than from Him especially in tough times. The passage that we look at today has a lot to say about God and His character.

It is one of the most famous and beloved Bible passages. It brings comfort and hope in difficult times. But one author points out the Psalm's special attraction. "It seems that with this passage of Scripture, more than any other, to recite it is also to experience it's reality. The Psalm itself is green pasture. The Psalm itself is still water. The Psalm itself restores my soul. Day by day, I lived by it. I ate it. I drank it in and sure enough in every situation it came true: the Lord was my shepherd, I did not want." (John Piper, Psalm 23, Aug. 17, 1980, Desiring God.org).

This Psalm may also be beloved because of its personal nature. There is no "we" or "us" or "they." It only contains my, me, I, he and you. It describes a very personal encounter with God. Perhaps this also attracts us to it. We hunger for an authentic experience with God. This Psalm describes that. Another writer notes "this Psalm's appeal lies in its simplicity and the beauty of its poetry, strengthened by its peaceful confidence in God. But more than that, the Psalm contains the extraordinary expression of a trusting relationship with God. "

Some of you are very familiar with this Psalm. I invite you to open yourselves up to the Holy Spirit's revelation of something new here that you might never have seen before. Some of you don't know this Psalm. I invite you to look for

the Lord and His character throughout. Once we've made our way through it, we will see how such a Psalm as this can greatly enhance our prayer lives.

Psalm 23 ESV

The Lord Is My Shepherd

A PSALM OF DAVID.

[23:1] 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 (New Living Translation)

A psalm of David.

¹ The LORD is my shepherd;

I have all that I need.

² He lets me rest in green meadows;

he leads me beside peaceful streams.

³ He renews my strength.

He guides me along right paths,

bringing honor to his name.

⁴ Even when I walk

through the darkest valley,^[a]

I will not be afraid,

for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff

protect and comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a feast for me

in the presence of my enemies.

You honor me by anointing my head with oil.

My cup overflows with blessings.

⁶ Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me

all the days of my life,

and I will live in the house of the LORD
forever.

David composed this Psalm. He once worked as a shepherd and ultimately became Israel's shepherd-king. He brought the 12 tribes of Israel together in a united kingdom and ruled for 40 years. The Lord considered Him to be Israel's greatest king not because of his great wealth (although he was wealthy). Nor was he considered great because of his military victories (though he had many). David had a heart for the Lord.

We see David portray the Lord first as a shepherd. "The Lord is my shepherd." A shepherd looked after sheep. Many people from the Bible were shepherds: Abraham, Rachel, Jacob, Moses and David. Shepherds led their flocks to find food and water. They couldn't stay in one pasture all the time because eventually the food supply would run out. So they lead their sheep to the next pasture from which the sheep could eat. Sometimes, this meant the shepherds were out at night with their flocks. So they needed to protect them especially from predators. They had to lead their sheep on right paths. Sometimes, to get to the next pasture, they had to go through valleys. The shepherd looked after his or her sheep and even carried weak lambs in their arms.

Here, David declares "the Lord is my shepherd." So the former shepherd and the king adopts the perspective of a sheep here. If you want to get this Psalm and know more of God, you must adopt a sheep's perspective. You need a shepherd. We must become aware of our helplessness and our need to let the shepherd lead us. When we adopt that perspective, we discover that the Lord God himself does the shepherding.

But then comes that phrase which always confused me as a kid. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." It sounds like David said the Lord was his shepherd but he didn't want that shepherd. Or "the Lord is my shepherd but I don't want that." But instead it means, the Lord is my shepherd and I shall not experience want. I shall not lack anything. Or as the New Living Translation puts it "I have all I need."

So when we adopt the perspective and posture of sheep and recognize the Lord as our shepherd, we will have all we need. We won't have necessarily all we want. But our needs will be looked after. But is this really accurate? Sheep always have needs. Sheep need to be led to the next pasture. Sheep need rest. So how can he say "I shall not be in want?" I think he's pointing out that as long as he keeps trusting in the Lord, he knows this shepherd will lead him to where his needs will be met.

(From piano side of platform) This is borne out by the next phrases. The Lord leads him to places which meet David's needs. "He makes me lie down in green pasture. He leads me beside the still water." A shepherd who leads his or her sheep to green pasture and still waters shows concern to guide and refresh the sheep. He recognizes that the journey of life often contains exhausting efforts, disappointing developments and an often frenzied pace. So the Lord's sheep, you and me, need refueling and renewal. That's one reason we gather together on Sundays. We gather to worship Him and receive from Him the strengthening of His Spirit and the meat of His Word. And God demonstrated His shepherd concern for us in instituting the day of rest. He knew that we need to stop from whirlwind of life and reconnect to the source of our lives.

Our shepherd God also restores our soul. This is likely not talking about restoration from sin. But a returning of life or vitality in the soul. Remember, we've learned from John 17:3 that eternal life is Knowing God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. When we're closely connected to God, we experience eternal life. Yet there are those times when our passion for Christ flickers like a light bulb not completely turned in to the socket all the way. And we don't have the strength to restore or bring that life or passion by ourselves.

What do we need during those times?

John Piper analyzed this in himself and came up with these three needs that are ultimately only met by God.

First, we need a sense of release from the anxious cares that have made us hopeless. He writes, "Sometimes the demands on our mind and time, combined with aggravating hindrances to getting it all done are like tight straps around the soul that squeeze all the life and color out of it. We need to feel those straps broken and a great swelling of hope. Nothing can cut these suffocating bands of anxiety from our soul, except one thing, the promises of God. Like Hebrews 13:5-6 – "Be content with what you have, for I will never fail you nor forsake you. Hence we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" Turn to God's promises. Let them minister to your soul.

Second, we need to see God's creative beauty. I hope we have all felt the impact of nature on our souls; the persistent thunder of the ocean; the quiet creation of a windless snowfall; the adorable behavior of a squirrel; the humbling majesty of a mountain. The sight or touch or smell of some astonishing beauty can restore our souls. Ultimately, these all come from God the creator.

Third, Piper writes “**I need to feel the reality of a great power outside myself flowing into me.** God created us to be conductors of an infinitely powerful current of life flowing from Himself, which is why ultimately the only satisfying restoration of soul comes from God.” We tap into it by recalling the promises of His Word and crying out to Him in prayer and marveling in something of creation.

(From non-piano side of the platform). So the Lord leads us to places of rest and renewal. But we can’t stay there. We still must live our lives. So He leads us on paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Real shepherds led real sheep on right paths to the next pasture. The Lord our shepherd will lead us on right paths of Godly living. When we let the Lord lead us in the basic moral direction of our lives, we won’t add to our life difficulties. Sin adds to our troubles, multiplies our difficulties and subtracts from our energy. But when we let the Lord lead us through His teaching about how to live, we will be led to live lives that ultimately bring honor to His name.

(From main floor on non-piano side of platform – Sanctuary lights fully dimmed to darkness)

Sometimes, these paths aren’t bright and shiny through a lovely forest. Sometimes, right paths lead into valleys of darkness and death. Verse 4 portrays a situation in which the sheep faces extreme danger. They have to go downhill and it’s dark. It’s the perfect place for predators to lie in wait. Yet notice what happens in verse 4. David changes the way he refers to the Lord from 3rd person – he – to second person – you. The Lord not only leads but gives David the assurance that he’s right beside him. When we go through the crises of life, we draw near to God. If you’re in a good time right now friend, your job is to cultivate a thankfulness for this season of blessing. If you’re in a difficult time, you’re more likely to be very open to God’s nearness. In fact you might even testify that the most significant times of growth in your faith occurred in tough times.

David writes, “Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.” Notice the word “through.” David is confident that he will come out to the other side of the valley. His confidence lies in the fact that the Lord comes close beside him. In fact, the Lord uses the rod to ward off predators and the staff to guide the sheep. These give David the sense of great protection and comfort.

But why would a shepherd lead his own sheep into a valley? Why would he take a sheep through a place of great danger and near death? The only reason a good shepherd would do that is to get to some better place for the sheep – some necessary place that the sheep needs to go. You may be going through a valley right now. But it’s no

surprise to God. He is beside you and leads you to something on the other side that will ultimately be for good. That's our God – the one who has the power to bring good from the tragedies and trials of life.

David presents us with this picture of the Lord as shepherd who will provide for our needs and ultimately lead us through the darkest valleys.

(Sanctuary Lights back up – From behind communion table)

But then, he changes the picture of the Lord in verse 5. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.” The scene has changed from the pasture to a banquet hall. **Here, David pictures the Lord as our host.** Now in that culture, hosting was a huge deal. You had major responsibilities and your job was to make sure your guests were looked after and well cared for. So you ensured that the table looked inviting. You anointed their head with oil to honor them. You gave them a cup to drink out of and filled it often so they could experience the abundance of the feast.

Here the Lord hosts and we are His guests. Notice, we're not some beggar sitting in the corner hoping for scraps from the table. Nor are we the servants ministering to Him. We're the honored guest. In fact, this feast seems to be one of a triumphant king. For defeated enemies are present. Sometimes kings would bring defeated enemies into the banquet hall to watch the celebration of the victors. It testified to the ultimate victory of the king and his guests over the enemy. They couldn't even stop the feast from happening. David exhibits confidence that he enjoys this intimate fellowship with the Lord and his enemies can do nothing to stop it.

So isn't this an incredible picture? Can you imagine being invited to God's house and for Him to serve you His best? Yet this is what God has been doing with His people throughout history. There is a very special picture of this in Exodus 24:9-12. It describes God literally setting a table and eating with Moses and the Elders of Israel. Like how incredible must this have been. They have just entered into covenant with God. Listen to what happened.

Exodus 24:9-12 ESV

⁹ Then Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel climbed up the mountain. ¹⁰ There they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there seemed to be a surface of brilliant blue lapis lazuli, as clear as the sky itself. ¹¹ And though these nobles of Israel gazed upon God, he did not destroy them. In fact, they ate a covenant meal, eating and drinking in his presence!

How could they ever forget that? How could they doubt the Lord in the wilderness only weeks later? God continues to invite His people as guests to His table. We experience that every month at the communion table. There Jesus calls us to remember His sacrifice and enjoy fellowship with Him and each other. When we come to Christ, we are not treated like some second class guest on standby hoping to get in. The Lord has a place for you at His banqueting table.

From Behind the pulpit

David concludes this Psalm in light of his experience at the Lord's table with that unbelievable declaration of verse 6. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And just like I dwell in the fellowship and presence of the Lord at His table now, I will one day dwell in His house forever." Did you get that? He pursues us each day with goodness and mercy. It is sure that the Lord's goodness and mercy will pursue you every day you live. If you're one of His, there's not a day goes by that God has not pursued you with his goodness and mercy.

That pursuit began with Jesus life on earth and death on the cross. For we could not experience the Lord as our shepherd and host if Jesus did not die on the cross. We could not eat at the Lord's table because our own sin prevented us from sitting there. There was no way we could make ourselves worthy or repair the damage. But God intervened with love and mercy. 1 John 4:9-10 state "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." That big word means Jesus put himself forward as a sacrifice that would satisfy God's holy wrath. Because of that, when we trust Christ for the first time, He becomes our shepherd and host and pursues us with goodness and mercy every day.

So if the Lord is your shepherd and host, you must first accept your role as His sheep and His guest. Then let Him lead you and host you and pursue you with goodness and mercy until you dwell in the His house forever.

Maybe you don't know the Lord. You have never put your trust in Jesus as the only one who paid the price, that sacrifice of atonement, then now is the time to do it. Put your trust in Christ and God will save you from His wrath.

And how can this all help our prayer lives? Well most of us pray the same old things about the same old things. After awhile, we cannot do it or we can't keep focused or we don't know if we can bear to say the same thing. So we give up or don't do it until we next fall into a valley. But what if we took our prayer list or the church's prayer list and prayed the Scriptures on them. What if we thought of that person or neighbor or child and prayed "O Lord, you are their

shepherd. So they don't lack anything that they really need. Please make them lie down in the green pastures you lead them too today. Please restore and revive their souls. Lead them on right paths so your name is glorified. And if they must go through a dark valley, walk beside them, protect them and guide them. Yet I praise you Lord that you will bring them through. And remind them Lord, that you invite them to your table as honored guest. In moments of discouragement, remind them that you honor them as if you are pouring the oil of blessing on their head and filling their cup to overflowing. Please pursue them with your goodness and mercy today until you bring them into your house forever." Then our prayers are not so easily distracted and trail off. Instead we enter into fellowship with the Triune God speaking to Him His words according to His will. And suddenly our prayer lives move from drudgery to delight. Who is God? What is He like? He's our shepherd, our host and our pursuer.

Going further

- Read John 10:11–18. What do these verses teach about Jesus' shepherd care for us?
- Discuss with some friends what Psalm 23 means to you. Ask them to do the same with you.
- In what ways has God pursued you with His goodness and mercy?
- Use the words of this Psalm 23 to praise and thank God for specific things in your life and to ask God for help with specific needs in your life or the lives of your family members.
- *Praying the Scriptures becomes relational as we speak to God and He speaks to us through His Word* – George Guthrie (For further info on turning your prayer life from drudgery to delight, check out Guthrie's Read the Bible for Life book, p. 232-237).