

Psalm 23. Few chapters in the Bible are so well known as Psalm 23. It has brought comfort in the midst of pain, is often read at funerals, and has been the last words of countless men and women. What is it about Psalm 23 that calms God's people? Let's take a closer look...

THE SHEPHERD (V. 1)¹

Psalm 23:1—A PSALM OF DAVID. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Never did a boy say to his father, “When I grow up I really want to be a shepherd.” The work was rough, demanding, even loathsome. Sheep are slow and defenseless. They are easy prey that wander out of sight, fight amongst themselves, startle easily, fall over, and pick up disease so easily.

If that isn't bad enough, the life of a shepherd is lonely and tiresome. From head to toe, shepherds would become filthy to save their herd and keep them healthy. It was a deplorable job (Gen 46:34), one that was handed down to the youngest son in many families.

This is the picture that God uses to describe His relationship with His people. We can be so slow to listen and to learn. We're prone to wander from His commands, fight amongst ourselves, sin against Him, and pick up spiritual diseases of every kind. That the God who is enthroned in majesty, self-sufficient, and powerful would stoop down to bless anyone is humbling. That He would send His Son to save us is beyond words.

“I shall not want.” It's satisfaction that David found by following God. Having the Lord as his shepherd, what more did he still need in life? What good thing did he lack (Psa 84:11)? Nothing at all.

David's needs were met, and his heart rested at peace in God's care. He has this sense of wonder in this psalm: *I get to be one of God's sheep!* He sinned a lot and experienced tragedy, but is it any wonder that David was called a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22)? He loved the Lord; this was his source of peace in life.

THE SHEEP (V. 2-5)

Knowing God meant so much to David that he had to say more in this psalm. What does it mean to be one of God's sheep? It means peace, life, guidance, comfort, and provision.

THEY HAVE PEACE AND SUSTENANCE

Psalm 23:2—He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

Sheep rarely lie down. Fear of predators, fighting within the flock, flies, and gnats keep them on alert. So helpless are these animals they can't hardly feed themselves. A flock lying down in peace means a good shepherd must be nearby. He ensures they have all they need, wants them to graze in the greenest pastures, and drink from the stillest waters.

Israel has few green areas and not many slow-moving streams. It's a dry land, not ideal for sheep. Shepherds had to toil to irrigate their pastures, break up the hardness of the land, remove rocks and stones, and plant grains—all of this just to make the land suitable.

Imagine a flock in a barren a land under the hand of a cruel shepherd. It would be miserable, and such a picture isn't far off from the lives led by so many people. Some think they need more income to satisfy their wants, while others are busy chasing dreams that have nothing to do with God. The pastures of this world are hard and scattered with mirages of water. Only the Shepherd knows where to find real, living, and lasting water.

Jesus said, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Look to Him satiate your soul and find rest.

THEY HAVE LIFE

Psalm 23:3a—He restores my soul.

The shepherd restores his sheep. He knows how always endanger their lives, so the idea is that he keeps bringing them back. Older or heavier sheep can roll over without being able to roll back. The younger ones like to wander and then become lost. If they any of the flock is to live, the shepherd has to bring them back to health and safety time after time again. If he's not faithful, they die.

It's an interesting reminder of ancient Israel. Scan the Old Testament and you'll see that God's people rarely had a shepherd who brought them back from spiritual destruction. Whether it was political leaders or spiritual ones, those in leadership fleeced the flock. They weren't

The Lord is My Shepherd

shepherds but wolves who often encouraged God's people to stray from Him. Zechariah 10:2 tells us the people were afflicted and even tormented, utterly miserable because of their leaders.

If God is the source of joy, anything outside of Him will always leave us disappointed.

THEY HAVE GUIDANCE AND COMFORT

Psalm 23:3b-4—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.

Sheep are creatures of habit to such a degree that they keep walking the same paths even after the grass is gone. Even their own habits undermine their survival! This was part of the reason that a shepherd had to lead his flock to new pastures.

The sheep grazed between the highlands and lowlands depending on the time of year. Though valleys were part of the route, they were darker and easier for predators. Only the shepherd's staff and rod, his protection, could ease their fears.

Throughout the Bible, God does bring pain into the lives of those who love Him. It's hard to deny that, even if we don't like it, but it's also clear there's always a good purpose. He takes us "through the valley of the shadow of death" sometimes. It isn't pleasant, but it's part of moving from one good pasture to the next. The comfort David found was just in knowing that his Shepherd was still there: "You are with me."

THEY HAVE PROVISIONS

Psalm 23:5—You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

A table? This was not a literal table for sheep to crowd around, but a figurative one. The shepherd prepared the tableland or highlands for his sheep in advance of their coming. He would take away poisonous plants, drive out predators, and clear debris from blocking the sources of water.

After all the preparations, the shepherd brought his sheep to the highlands and rubbed oil on their heads to protect from flies. It was his goal to provide an idyllic land for his sheep where their every need was supplied, and they had no reason to be distracted or worried. He went ahead of them to ensure the goodness of their next home.

John 14:2-3—In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Hasn't Christ gone before His flock to prepare a place for them? The preparations have been made, and He invites everyone to come.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 23:6—Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

David understood shepherding. He knew sheep, and he humbly came to see himself as one under God's care. Knowing the heart of God, David was certain that goodness and mercy would be with him forever (Rom 8:28). More literally, these blessings would pursue or chase after him relentlessly.

What does the heart of a believer look like? We have an example of it here with David. He sinned sometimes greatly and wandered from the Lord more than once, but he kept coming back. The goodness and mercy of God pursued him as he says in this final verse, and likely these meant more to him after falling into sin than beforehand. David loved God, came to rejoice in God, and grew in his hatred of wandering away from God.

The Shepherd truly is good, and the more His sheep know of Him, the more they love Him and want to follow. They humbly realize how much they need Him and how much joy there is in belonging to One who is so good (Psa 100).

¹ See Phillip Keller's work entitled, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Keller wrote this devotional from his personal experiences as a shepherd.