

Walking Through the Valley of the Virus

Psalm 23

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Once, a Sunday School teacher asked her class, “*How many of you can quote Psalm 23?*” Several students raised their hands, including a little girl who was only four years old. She stood up and declared loudly, “*The Lord is my shepherd. I got all I want.*” She had the words mixed up but understood the message perfectly.

Most everyone has heard of the 23rd Psalm even if they can’t quote it correctly. It’s a poem with no peer and has been called the sweetest psalm ever written. Abraham Lincoln read it to cure his blues, and President Bush read it publicly to calm our nation’s fears after 9-11. We could call it the psalm that calms the soul.

Since this psalm is so familiar, we’re in danger of missing the depth of its meaning. Because its setting is in the world of sheep and shepherds, many of us city slickers can slide right past its richness. Are you aware the Bible refers to us as sheep nearly two hundred times? This is not usually a compliment because sheep are smelly, stubborn, and prone to wander.

Now, listen to the Word of God.

“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. 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. 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.”

David, the human author, was a shepherd in his youth. However, he writes it from the perspective of sheep grazing and gazing at their caring shepherd. The psalm moves from victories to valleys and spans all of life, from the womb to the tomb.

Let’s put the sermon into a sentence: *If you want the calm of this psalm, you must become one of the Shepherd’s sheep.*

I see three main activities of the Shepherd:

- **The Shepherd Provides** (1-3)
- **The Shepherd Protects** (4-5)
- **The Shepherd Preserves** (6)

The Shepherd Provides

1. Relationship (1a). God provides for us through a relationship. Look at the first phrase of verse 1: ***The Lord.*** This is the title “Yahweh” and was the first name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14: ***I AM WHO I AM.*** Ordinarily, Israelites considered this name too holy to be spoken by human lips. It was so revered that it was only pronounced once a year on the Day of Atonement, and then only by the high priest in the most holy place of the Temple.

David says the great “I AM” is ***“my”*** shepherd. The word ***“is”*** is in the present tense, meaning the Lord is David’s shepherd at that very moment. And ***“my”*** is the possessive personal pronoun, which shows how personal God is. David uses ***“my,” “me”*** and ***“I”*** 17 times in this psalm.

This is similar to Psalm 8 where we read, ***“O Lord*** [“Yahweh”], ***our Lord.*** He is other than us *and* yet He is ours. He is powerful *and* He is personal. He is far away *and* yet He calls us friend. He is majestic *and* He is mine.

Shepherding was considered the lowest of all work. It was an unpleasant assignment that demanded 24/7 attention through summer and winter, in fair and foul weather. Aren’t you glad the Sovereign has stooped to be our Shepherd Savior?

2. Replenishment (1b). When you have a relationship with the Shepherd, He will replenish you so you can say: ***“I shall not want.”*** Left to themselves, sheep lack everything but with a good shepherd they have everything they need. When we have the Lord, we lack nothing.

If Jesus is your shepherd, everything else is secondary. We could say it like this: *“If the Lord is my shepherd, then I shall not want. If I am in want, then I’m not allowing the Lord to be my shepherd.”* Psalm 34:9: ***“Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack!”*** One of the best definitions of contentment I’ve ever heard is this: *“Contentment is not having everything you’ve always wanted. Contentment is wanting everything you already have.”*

This past week, Edgewood member Donna Glynn made a fascinating post on Facebook. I'm sharing it because it reveals her heart to help the hurting: "*What is one thing you NEED?*" When various people shared their needs, Donna responded with how she could help. This generated over 70 comments. My favorite response was from Edgewood member Fran Harvell, who's in a wheelchair: "*Nothing really. I have everything I actually need and a lot of what I want.*" When I asked Donna for permission to share this, she humbly responded: "*Absolutely. We all need to take care of one another in these days.*"

Max Lucado refers to our discontent as the "*prison of want.*" Its prisoners want something bigger. Nicer. Faster. Thinner. If your happiness comes from something you deposit, drive, drink, or digest, then you're in the prison of want. Are you hoping a change in circumstance will bring a change in your attitude? If so, you're locked up. You're in a cell of discontentment. Allow the sweet simplicity of verse 1 to sink into your soul: *What you have in your shepherd is greater than what you don't have in life.* Do you believe that?

3. Rest (2). After providing us with a relationship and replenishment, our Shepherd gives us rest in verse 2: "***He makes me lie down in green pastures...***" Notice He "***makes***" me lie down. Sometimes the shepherd had to institute forced rest periods for a sheep by folding its legs in such a way that it would become paralyzed for a while and therefore had to lie down to get much-needed rest. A sheep cannot properly digest their food unless they lie down. We've all been made to hunker in at home, right now, haven't we? The shepherd has slowed us all down for a reason during this season.

To "***lie down***" conveys the sense of rest, safety and security. I'm reminded of Psalm 4:8: "***In peace I will lie down to sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.***"

Philip Keller points out the best way to get a flock to chill out was to make sure a couple conditions were met.

- **Freedom from fear.** By nature, sheep are nervous and fearful. Isaiah 43:5: "***Do not be afraid, for I am with you.***"
- **Freedom from famine.** A hungry sheep is forever on its feet, foraging for food. The shepherd makes sure they are in "***green pastures,***" or "***grassy meadows,***" where they can feed among the rich, sweet grass and then chew their cud while lying down on the carpeted pasture.

After being fully fed, David writes: ***“He leads me beside quiet waters.”*** Notice the Shepherd doesn’t push from the back but gently leads from the front. Incidentally, sheep have to be moved or they will gorge themselves on all the grass. After eating they are in desperate need of water. By nature, they are afraid of moving water and will refuse to drink unless everything is still and quiet. It was not uncommon for a shepherd to divert a rushing river to make a placid pool.

The shepherd has to lead the sheep to the good water because otherwise they will stop and drink from polluted puddles where they can pick up parasites. We’re a lot like that, aren’t we? God has provided so much for us and yet we often drink from places that will only harm us.

In his excellent series on Psalm 23 found on Right Now Media, Matt Chandler says this: *“If you listen to the voice of your own internal compulsions, then you are never good enough, you’re never finished, there is always something else to get done, you are constantly having to prove yourself, and there will be no rest there. If you are listening to the other voices of people who are demanding you be more of this, or less of that, or stop this or start that, then how could you ever rest?”*

4. Restoration (3a). The fourth way the Shepherd provides is found in the first part of verse 3. Because sheep are careless, curious, and cantankerous creatures, they often need to be restored. We see this in the first part of verse 3: ***“He restores my soul.”*** To ***“restore”*** means to *“bring back to a former or normal state, to renew or revive.”* As a Hebrew idiom it refers to repentance. David knew all about the need to be renewed because he had committed adultery and murder.

Because sheep are prone to wander, they can easily get lost. This may lead them to fall and then a predator could pounce on them. Sometimes they would simply tip over on the uneven ground, becoming *“cast down.”* This is a term for a sheep that is lying flat on its back, with its feet flailing in the air. In this precarious position, they would panic, causing gasses to build up in their body, cutting off circulation in their legs, leading to death in a matter of hours.

When a sheep is missing, the first thought to flash through the shepherd’s mind is one of his sheep may be cast. Buzzards and coyotes know that a cast sheep is easy pickings. When the shepherd finally finds the sheep, he rolls it over and lifts it to its feet. Then he straddles the panicked animal, holding it erect, rubbing its limbs to restore circulation, while talking to it gently.

What a picture of what God does for straying saints! He looks for us when we have wandered and picks us up when we are flat on our backs. If you're cast down today, or have strayed from the flock, repent and allow the Shepherd to restore your soul. He'll bring you back and He'll put you back together.

5. Righteousness (3b). The fifth way the Shepherd provides is found in verse 3. After dusting us off, He sends us in the right direction: ***“He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.”*** The word used for ***“paths”*** refers to a ***“well-defined and well-worn trail.”*** God longs to lead us in paths of righteousness. Most of us know the right road we should take but our selfishness and sinfulness often lead us astray. We need the Shepherd to guide us in the right way because like sheep, we have no sense of direction on our own. If we don't go His way, we will go astray.

I love that God feeds and leads us for His glory and for the fame of His holy name. Psalm 115:1: ***“Not to us Lord, not to us, but to your name be glory.”***

If you want the calm of this psalm, you must become one of the Shepherd’s sheep. The Shepherd provides by relationship, replenishment, rest, restoration and righteousness. Let's look next at how He protects His flock.

The Shepherd Protects

When we come to verse 4, we see a couple changes. In verses 1-3, the sheep are in the sunshine. In verse 4, they're in the shadows. God not only *provides* for us through delightful times, He *protects* us through the dark seasons of life. He leads us through the glen and the gorge.

Notice how the pronouns change. In the first half, David is extolling the virtues of the Shepherd, using “He” and “His” to refer to Yahweh. When we come to the second half, he speaks to the Shepherd more personally: ***“You are with me, your rod and your staff...you prepare...you anoint.”***

When times were tough, God became more real to David. Have you experienced that? The promise-keeping God protects us when we face problems by giving us three promises.

1. Peace. Look at the first part of verse 4: ***“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...”*** The phrase, ***“even though”*** can be translated, ***“even then, when...”*** The idea is we *will* go through valleys, like

we are right now with the virus. The picture here is of the shepherd leading his sheep through rocky ravines and narrow gorges where long shadows would dance across the trail, frightening the flock. The experienced shepherd knows this is where predators wait in ambush for some fresh lamb chops.

Observe we walk **“through”** the valley. We don’t have to stay there. But we must keep walking. Through the blackness there is brightness. Through the gloom there is glory. In one sense the shadow of something is more ominous than what it represents. On the other hand, the shadow of a dog cannot bite us, and the shadow of death cannot harm us if we stay close to the Shepherd. When there is a shadow there must be light somewhere.

Don’t miss that God leads us through the shadowlands just as He leads us into the promised land. Also, this valley is but the **“shadow”** of death for the Christian, because as 1 Corinthians 15:55 reminds us, the Redeemer has removed the sting of death; only the shadow of it remains. In John 8:51, Jesus says, **“Whoever keeps my word will not see death”** and in John 11:26, **“And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”**

2. Presence. The second way the Shepherd protects is by His presence. David can deal with the valley of the shadow of death because he can say, **“you are with me.”** The Shepherd goes *before us* when the path is smooth, and He stands *beside us* when the path is scary. Psalm 16:8 says the antidote to anxiety is to stay close to the Shepherd: **“I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.”**

I turn to Matt Chandler again: *“The promise we get here is not a life without pain; it’s that in our pain, regardless of what that pain is, He will be with us.”*

Jesus promises to be present with us in Hebrews 13:5-6, **“I will never leave you nor forsake you. So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’”**

David continues, **“Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”** The **“rod”** was used to protect the sheep. Shepherds were very adept in their aim and would throw this club at attacking animals. The **“staff”** was a slender pole, with a little crook on the end. It could be hooked around the leg of a sheep to pull him from harm. It was also utilized to lift sheep out of crevices they had fallen into.

- The rod was used to *confront*, while the staff showed *care*.
- The rod provided *protection* and the staff communicated *presence*.

- The rod was *tough*, and the staff was *tender*.

I'm told a shepherd would use the rod with his sheep on two occasions. One was to help him count the sheep as they would pass under the rod to make sure none were missing. The other was to discipline them when nothing else worked.

3. Preparation. In verse 5, the third way the Shepherd protects is through preparation. David writes, "***You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.***" Some suggest David is switching metaphors to that of a gracious dinner host. There might be something to that, but he could be using a common expression to describe what a shepherd does to "*prepare a pasture.*" Ideally, the best place for the sheep to graze is on a flat mesa, or tableland. Before letting the lambs romp around, the shepherd would inspect it for poisonous plants and make sure there were no predators prowling around. The sheep can eat even though there are enemies nearby because the shepherd is doing His job.

This reminds me of the young boy who was messing around during dinner. After being warned several times, his parents finally told him he had to eat by himself at a tiny table in the corner. When he sat down, his dad reminded him to pray before he ate. He closed his eyes and prayed, "*Bless this food that I eat in the presence of my enemies.*"

The word "***enemy***" can mean to bind up, to tie up, to be distressed, to be troubled, to be oppressed, to be cramped. We're at war right now with an invisible virus that is stalking us. I'm praying God will bring revival to our lives, our church, the QCA, our country and the world.

4. Prevention. The fourth way the Shepherd protects is through prevention. The middle section of verse 5 is rich in meaning: "***You anoint my head with oil.***" If David is referring to a dinner party, he has in mind the generous host who puts fragrant oil on his esteemed guest's forehead. This would help neutralize body odor that could spoil a fine dining experience. In our culture, it would be like giving your guests a stick of deodorant when they came to your house. In that day, oil was also a sign of rejoicing so to be anointed with it was to be splashed with joy.

While that may shed some light on the meaning of this text, David is still submerged in the sheep and shepherd relationship. In ancient Israel, shepherds used oil for three purposes:

- **To repel insects.** Sheep are really bothered by bugs because flies like to deposit their eggs into the tender membrane of their noses. When the eggs hatched, the maggots would drive the sheep mad, causing them to beat their heads against rocks and trees. The shepherd knows what flies can do so he covers their heads with an oil-like repellent.
- **To prevent conflict.** Oil was also used to prevent injury to the rams when they butted heads in their battle to win the affection of the ewes. Whenever the shepherd would hear two guys say to the same lady, “*I want ewe, babe,*” [come on, that was funny!]. He knew there was going to be a rumble. He’d quickly smear this slippery substance on their heads so the gladiators would glide off each other rather than splitting their craniums open.
- **To heal wounds.** Oil was also used as an ointment because the flock would get a lot of wounds and cuts simply from living in a pasture. Sheep would get pierced by prickly thorns and they would receive abrasions from the rocks. Oil would prevent infection and speed up the healing process.

What a beautiful picture of what the Shepherd does for us. He deals with our problems by protecting us from those things that can wipe us out. He helps us have harmony with others. And, He comforts us and heals us when we’re beat up. We’re wounded sheep in need of a healing Shepherd. Do you have any wounds today?

If you want the calm of this psalm, you must become one of the Shepherd’s sheep.

The Shepherd Preserves

Our Shepherd *provides* and He *protects*. He also *preserves* us in two ways.

1. Help for today (5c-6a). Look at the last part of verse 5: “...***My cup overflows.***” The word “***overflow***” refers to an overabundance, or a “*state of overflowing.*” The Amplified Version renders it this way: “*My brimming cup runs over.*” The “***cup***” has two possible meanings. A shepherd would often carry water to drink and would share it with his sheep. He would be generous because he knew they had to have liquid, or they would perish.

The other meaning may be that of a dinner host who would serve drinks in cups and fill them to the brim. This was a common way to tell guests that they could stay as long as they wanted. But when a cup sat empty, the host was hinting that it was time to leave. When the host really enjoyed the company of the guests, he filled their cups until the liquid ran over the edge of the cup and onto the floor.

God loves to lavish His blessings on us as Ephesians 3:20 says: ***“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think...”***

Look at the beginning of verse 6: ***“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life...”*** **“Surely”** is an emphatic expression that can be translated, ***“Yes, indeed!”*** The goodness and mercy of God are two of the most comforting attributes of God, especially when we’re walking through the valley of the virus. **“Goodness”** refers to well-pleasing.

I love one of the sayings from Celebrate Recovery, our ministry that continues to meet on Friday nights via Facebook Live for people dealing with hurts, habits and hang-ups: ***“God is good all the time...and all the time God is good!”***

“Mercy” is a covenant term often translated as ***“loving-kindness.”*** This attribute is beautifully repeated 26 times in Psalms 136. As recipients of His mercy, we don’t receive what we deserve. If God gave us justice, we’d be consumed by His righteous wrath.

To ***“follow”*** literally means, ***“to pursue or to chase after.”*** One paraphrase puts it like this: ***“Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.”*** What a picture! Aren’t you glad God chases you with His goodness and mercy?

Goodness supplies our sustenance while mercy blots out our sins. Spurgeon refers to goodness and mercy as ***“two guardian angels always at my back and beck.”*** Ironside calls them ***“two sheepdogs that keep sheep where they belong.”***

I turn to Chandler again: ***“Not only is there going to be goodness and mercy that’s followed me. It’s there every morning when I get up, and I turn around and there it is again. I turn around and there’s goodness. I turn around there’s mercy. I blow it again, and there’s goodness and mercy. I get exhausted, there’s goodness, there’s mercy. I’m frazzled, there’s goodness and mercy. I snap at my spouse or children, there’s goodness and mercy. I blow it at work, there’s goodness and mercy.”***

God’s goodness and mercy led Jesus to the Cross, where the Good Shepherd gave His life for His sheep. He’s pursuing you right now in order to give you more than you need and certainly more than you deserve.

2. Hope for tomorrow (6b). We can have help for today and hope for tomorrow. Look at the last phrase of verse 6: ***“...And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD***

forever.” The word “ *dwell* ” means “*to reside, to settle down and be at home with*” and “ *shall* ” is a promise it will happen for those who are His sheep.

The sheep have been following the shepherd to green pastures and through shadowy problems. The flock is now ready to winter in the safe harbor of the Good Shepherd’s home. They are so satisfied with the flock they belong to and with the ownership of the Shepherd, they want everything to just go on forever. And for those who are saved, Jesus the Good Shepherd, promises in John 10:28: “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*”

Lamb Lessons

I see three lamb lessons from this psalm.

1. Join the Shepherd’s flock. *If you want the calm of this Psalm, you must become one of the Shepherd’s sheep.* The Lord is looking for lost sheep right now. If you have never asked Jesus to save you from your sins and shepherd your life, you are not yet in His flock. Jesus said in John 10:14: “*I am the good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.*” Do you know the Shepherd?

Here’s an amazing truth, in order to become the Good Shepherd, Jesus first had to become a sheep, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Will you repent and receive Jesus as your Savior right now so He will be your Shepherd, providing help for today and hope for tomorrow?

2. Stay close to the Shepherd. I’m told some sheep come to the shepherd daily to rub against his legs and wait for a pat on the head. Sheep that stay close to the shepherd reach the water first. Those next to the shepherd get to the sweetest grass first. And they’re near to Him when fear is high. But most of all they get to enjoy life with the shepherd by their side. When we stay close to the Shepherd, He will make sure all of our needs are met.

Unfortunately, some of us like to stray. As a last resort, a shepherd will discipline a straying sheep by putting a leg across his rod and with one quick motion, pull down on the leg to break it. Because the sheep cannot walk, the shepherd then carries the sheep from field to field, sometimes even putting him on his shoulders. As a result, the sheep becomes so used to being close to the shepherd, he can’t imagine going his own way again.

Perhaps the Lord is disciplining you right now. If so, it's not to punish you but to bring you back to His side. 1 Peter 2:25: ***“For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”***

3. Follow wherever He leads. The Shepherd has a plan for you and wants to lead you in paths of righteousness. Are you willing to follow Him, regardless of the direction He takes you?

I like how Ray Pritchard says it: *“If you believe in the sovereignty of God, then it must be true that you are where you are because God wants you there, because if God didn't want you to be there, you would be somewhere else. But since you are where you are right now, that must be because you are there by God's design. When He wants you to be somewhere else, that's where you'll be. If you believe that, then you can do your work each day, even in a very bad situation, as unto the Lord, with all your might, for His glory.”*

In the late 1800s, entertainment consisted of traveling groups of actors who went from town to town. One such actor went to a small mid-western town. The town hall was packed, and the audience was wildly enthusiastic as the orator recited passages from great plays, poems, and literature. At the end of the performance, they shouted for more. The actor agreed to take a few requests.

Immediately, a hand shot up from an older man with a weather-beaten face: *“Would you...could you...recite the 23rd Psalm, please?”* The actor thought for a minute, then said, *“I'll do it on one condition. After I've finished, you will come up and recite it, also.”* Puzzled, the old man agreed.

The actor began, ***“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”*** As he continued, he infused the words with all the tricks of his art. One by one, the phrases known and loved by all rolled off his tongue. When all the words of the sweet psalm were delivered with oratorical relish, the audience gave the actor yet another enthusiastic ovation.

Then, the man who had requested the psalm came up. His face was not handsome, and his voice was thick and uncultured. Yet, as he began to speak, his face started to glow and love almost leapt from his mouth as he quoted the words.

When he concluded, ***“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in house of the Lord forever,”*** the only sound in the room was of people crying.

The silence was finally broken when the actor stepped forward and said, “*Now you know why I wanted him to follow me. You see, I know the psalm, but he, he knows the Shepherd!*”

Do you know the Shepherd? *If you want the calm of this psalm, you must become one of the Shepherd’s sheep.*

You can enter a relationship with Him right now by praying this prayer...

Lord, I’ve been straying for a long time, just living my life my own way. I confess I’m a sinner and I repent from how I’ve been living. Jesus, thank You for dying as the Lamb of God on the cross, shedding Your blood to pay the price for all my sins and for rising from the dead on the third day. Thank You for Your goodness and for Your mercy which have been pursuing me. Now, I surrender to You by asking You to save me from my sins. Come into my life so that I can become one of Your sheep and dwell in Your house forever. In the meantime, enable me to stay close to You, my Shepherd as you feed and lead me by providing, protecting and preserving me, all for Your name’s sake. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, would you tell a friend and then send us an email at info@edgewoodbaptist.net so we can give you some material to help you grow?

May God be with you until we meet again.