



Finding Rest in God's Provision

A Study of Psalm 23

Why Jesus Matters

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An Introduction

The Psalms are songs. As such, they have an intended emotional response. It is possible to become so familiar with something that its intended impact loses its appeal. When we consider all of the horrific news inundating us, we become emotionally desensitized. It no longer moves us. This is often what happens in our treatment of truth.

Read Psalm 23. Let the words sink in. Contemplate it. Feel it. Let it move you.

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.

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

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

The Bible tells a single *Story* and at the center of this *Story* is Jesus. What we read of in Genesis and Revelation is reflected in this Psalm. It is as if the *Story* is this enormous magnet, and as it passes over the parts, they all jump off the page and connect to the *Story*. When I read Psalm 23, I hear Genesis and Revelation. I hear the Lord's Prayer. Let us see if we can hear this *Story* and feel this Psalm.

The entire Bible speaks of God's provision. This text tells us that God's provision enables us to live without fear. God gives us rest from the fear and anxiety caused by need. His person gives rest, his provision

gives rest, and it is our desire to see how his provision provides rest.

Because Jesus is our Shepherd, there is no want; thus, there is no fear in our uncertainties, whether immediate or long-term.

The Context

Why the shepherd/sheep imagery? Sheep are dependent on the abilities of the shepherd. Their complete survival and well-being are tied to the shepherd. In the absence of a shepherd, they will die. The shepherd carries all of the responsibility in the relationship. The sheep have none.

When we visit our daughter in New Zealand, sheep and cattle are pervasive, with approximately six sheep per person. In the USA, we have roughly 55 people for every one sheep. If we were living in New Zealand, the imagery would be most natural. Thus, our psalm would have immediate connection with the reader on every level: emotional, physical, and financial. The relationship between the sheep and the shepherd was literally life and death.

If we group the Psalms topically or by theme, Psalm 23 could be called "A Psalm of

Trust." In God's overarching Providence, however, Psalm 23 follows Psalm 22 and precedes Psalm 24. Psalm 22 is famous for verse 1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?" and Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the LORD'S and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein."

How is it that we move from the groaning of great emotion in Psalm 22 to the enormous intellectual affirmation of praise in Psalm 24? Tying together these two Psalms is Psalm 23, where it is no accident that our volition shows itself.

The author is David, the Shepherd King who pulls from his own experience to communicate his deep trust in YHWH as his Shepherd.

The LORD is my Shepherd; I Shall Not Want (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 23 is very personal. There are no references to “we” or “us” or “they,” but only “my” and “me” and “I” and “You.” Five times “my” is used (vv. 1, 3, 5, 6). Four times, “I” is used (vv. 1, 4, 6). Notice verse one:

**¹ The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.**

The four statements that follow (vv. 2, 3) are saying the same thing. They speak to how the Shepherd cares for his sheep in such a way that they “do not want.”

This is what the good shepherd does so the sheep are not in 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

The first two statements are very tangible. They are there to help us understand the essential nature of what the shepherd does. There is no possible way apart from this action by the shepherd that the sheep will survive. The second two are the real issue. The green pastures and still waters are really about soul care. God is going to take care of your soul.

The next statement, “**for his name's sake**” answers the “why” of our Psalm.

Here is what is at stake. The question asked is, “Can this Shepherd take care of his sheep?” The state of his flock reflects either poorly or well on the Shepherd. If you and I were to see a flock of sickly sheep ill cared for, we would blame the shepherd, not the sheep. In fact, neglecting animals is criminal.

Notice verse 36 within the Matthew 9:35-38 passage.

³⁵ “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. ³⁶ **When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.** ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest’” (Matt. 9:35-38)

At the end of the day, God is the one who is ultimately watching over and caring for his sheep. Yet, he has put his people over his flock and he fully expects these “shepherds” to care for them. This is the language of the New Testament as it relates to the Pastors and Elders of the local church.

Friends, how we as a fellowship care for God’s sheep is a reflection on our Chief Shepherd.

The LORD is my Shepherd; I Shall Not Fear (vv. 4-6)

When you look at our text, verse 4 appears a bit isolated. It struggles to work exclusively with either section. Let us consider it in light of verses 5 and 6.

“Why does David switch from talking about God with ‘He’ to talking to God with ‘You,’ and why does it happen in v. 4? Why didn't he just go on to say, ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for He is with me; His rod and His staff, they comfort me?’ May I suggest that the change ‘He’ to the more intimate ‘You’ happens in v. 4 precisely because it's there he speaks of the valley he has walked. He has felt the shadows closing in. Verse 4 describes the crisis points in his life. And in those times, something deep happened between him and God.”¹

There is a vital connection between these two parts. The idea that we might have need

causes us to fear. “How will we care for ourselves and those under us?” A single parent, an unemployed primary caregiver, an aging parent, a widowed individual, a single who longs for companionship, a student struggling to pass, each and every one of us longs for unconditional love. These are the scenarios that cause us need and thus fear. **This text assures us that God as our Shepherd meets our needs, thus cancels out our fears.**

There is a shift in the image. There are two parts to the picture. It is described in two ways but says the same thing.

⁴Even though I walk through
the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;

Perhaps our greatest need confronts us at death. It is this need that causes our greatest fear.

Why need I not fear? Because my Shepherd is with me. Notice the end of verse 4:

your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

This is not punitive, but protective. He defends us against the lion and the bear, just as David, the author of this Psalm did in 1 Samuel 17:34-36.

Notice how “death” is described in verse 5 as an “enemy.” Can we not hear this same language in 1 Corinthians 15 where death is described as our last enemy?

- For he must reign, **until he has put all his enemies under his feet.** (1 Cor. 15:25).
- **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.** (1 Cor. 15:26).

Right now, the **ascended enthroned reigning Christ** has defeated death (2 Tim. 1:9, 10; Heb. 2:14), but there is a fuller expression of its demise that is still waiting for the return of Jesus (Rev. 19; 20).

Notice our Psalm. There is an intentional parallelism throughout. Some of the parallelism is synonymous, but also climactic. It is building. It says the same thing, but expands and furthers our understanding.

Here is the surprise in our text. There is a lavishness to all of this. The language almost appears defiant. In the face of my greatest enemy, God has prepared a banquet table where life and celebration exist.

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

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

Notice the parallelism and progression. It all ends with “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” God is going to bring his

people back into his Garden where they will be with him for their joy.

Because Jesus is our Shepherd there is no want, thus there is no fear in our uncertainties whether immediate or long-term.

The Transfer to Jesus

Let us shift for just a moment and ask the question asked of Philip by a group of spiritually hungry Greeks.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus” (John 12:21).

Jesus is the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy, picture, and shadow. In him we have the “already” and the “not yet.” In the present, his people need not want nor fear. Yet, a day is coming when we will never ever want again and we will never ever fear again. May we find comfort in our moment, but long for the day of full disclosure.

John 10 says Jesus is the good shepherd and he is the door for his sheep. No one gets in or out except through him. In Psalm 46 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” When your soul is under siege and the walls seem to bow and the ground cracks and the roof leaks, Jesus is

standing in the gap. No one and no thing is going to get through.

Jesus is our Shepherd who meets our needs and cancels our fears. Because he is everything we need, we need not fear and we can rest.

Conclusion

What situation finds you wanting? What situation finds you fearing because of this want?

Both are answered in Jesus. He is our Good Shepherd and our Chief Shepherd who will one day enable us never to thirst or hunger again.

Friends, I speak to you not just as an under-shepherd, but also as a sheep. We can rest in our uncertainty because Jesus is with us.

“There was once a Shakespearean actor who was known everywhere for his one-man shows of readings and recitations from the classics. He would always end his performance with a dramatic reading of Psalm 23.

“Each night, without exception, as the actor began his recitation - ‘The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want’. . . the crowd

would listen attentively. And then, at the conclusion of the Psalm, they would rise in thunderous applause in appreciation of the actor's incredible ability to bring the verse to life.

“But one night, just before the actor was to offer his customary recital of Psalm 23, a young man from the audience spoke up. ‘Sir, do you mind if tonight I recite Psalm 23?’ The actor was quite taken back by this unusual request, but he allowed the young man to come forward and stand front and center on the stage to recite the Psalm, knowing that the ability of this unskilled youth would be no match for his own talent.

“With a soft voice, the young man began to recite the words of the Psalm. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience had been so moved by the young man's recitation that every eye was full of tears. Amazed by what he had

heard, the actor said to the youth, 'I don't understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training - but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. Tell me, what is your secret?'

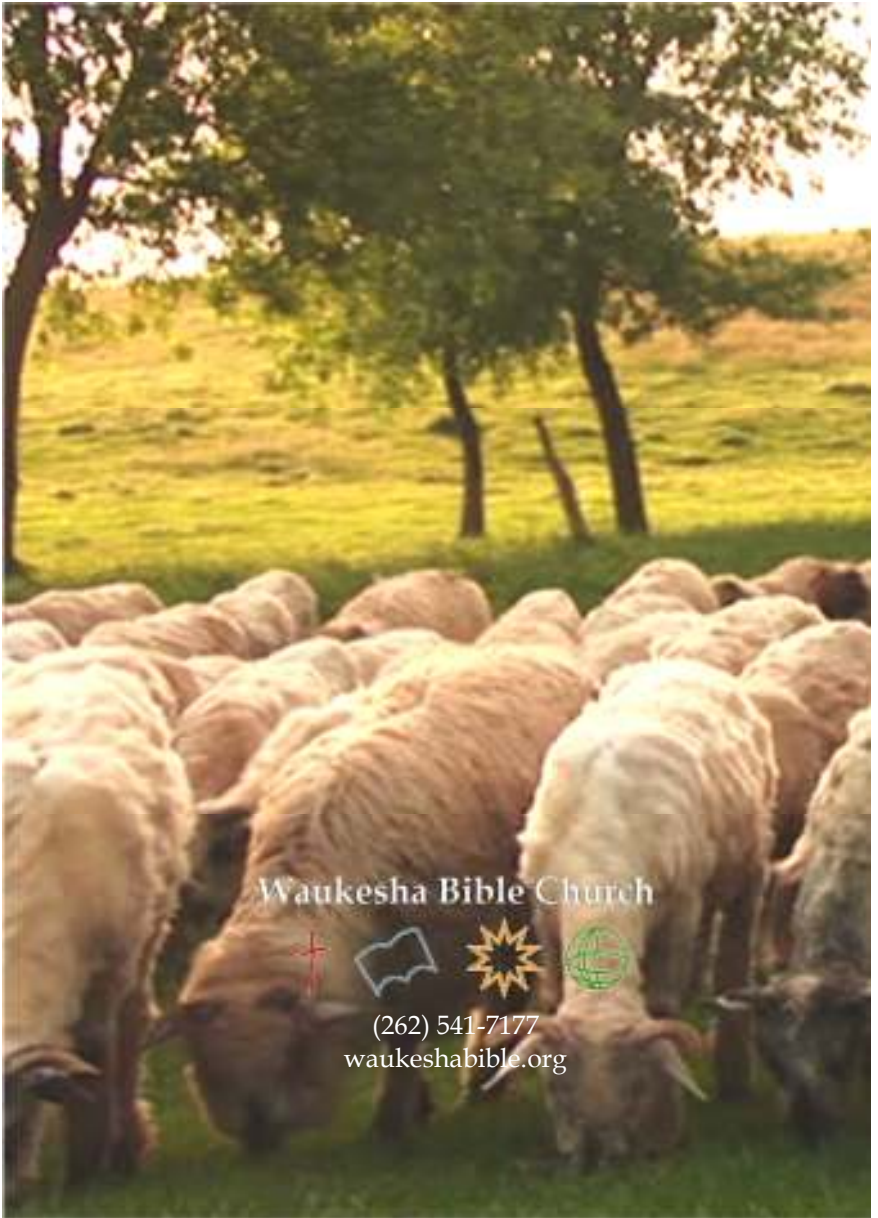
"The young man quietly replied, 'Well sir, you know the Psalm... I know the Shepherd.'"²

Because Jesus is our Shepherd there is no want, thus there is no fear in our uncertainties whether immediate or long-term.

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-crisis-lord-shepherd-psalm-23>

² http://www.skywriting.net/inspirational/stories/i_know_the_shepherd.html



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