

Psalm 23 Unshackled

Psalm 23:1-6 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 right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I 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 my whole life long.

Mark 6:30-34 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming, and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

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Several people have told me that they have sung or heard the song *Amazing Grace* at so many funerals that they have difficulty singing it. It reminds them of so many friends and family members that have died, that when they try to sing *Amazing Grace* the grief comes flooding back. In their minds, the hymn has become bound to memories of death and funerals. How many of you experience *Amazing Grace* that way?

Psalm 23 is a short, simple statement. And it may well be the most familiar piece of scripture. Even those who aren't affiliated with any church will run into the 23rd Psalm at almost any funeral they attend. It has become an American secular icon, familiar to both the devout and those unacquainted with Jewish or Christian faith or the scriptures. It is so familiar that we may feel like we completely understand it. Familiarity can breed assumptions. Psalm 23 seems to be used almost exclusively in situations of extremity and loss, and it has a reputation as a funeral psalm. Perhaps this is because of the phrase about walking in the valley of the shadow of death. Tell me, when you're at a funeral and you see the 23rd Psalm printed in the bulletin, or when the 23rd Psalm is read out loud during the service, do you think about the one who has died passing through the valley of the shadow of death, or, are you thinking about your own feelings and emotional state?

I think we've chained Psalm 23 to the casket and the grave, and in so doing, we've robbed this psalm of so much more that it has to offer. We've bound it and tied it to one situation and that can keep us from fully hearing the strong declaration of faith and trust in these few verses. Oddly enough, in most parts of the world, Psalm 23 is not known primarily as a funeral psalm. One reason may be that many cultures are familiar with sheep herds and shepherds. Here in the U.S. we have cattle herds, cowboys, and rodeos. Our western movies are about cattle drives, not about herding sheep. Since we're ill equipped to relate to shepherds, perhaps we focus on something more common, the "shadow of death."

In Deuteronomy 2:7, we're told that the Israelites remembered how God had cared for them as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness. They had found God to be steadfast, so steadfast that they lacked nothing they needed. Psalm 23 reflects that trust in God to provide. Psalm 23 is about life and living! It invites us to receive life as a gift, God's gracious gift.

In the ancient Near East, kings were known as the shepherds of their people. Both the prophet Jeremiah and the prophet Ezekiel make strong use of the word shepherd to speak about the kings of the Jews and about their duties as leaders of the people. Africans and Asians often understand the metaphor of "The Lord is my shepherd." Many of them, being familiar with the role

of a shepherd, and living under oppressive regimes, hear this first verse of Psalm 23 and defiantly proclaim, “The Lord is my shepherd – you aren’t! My supreme ruler and my ultimate allegiance is not found in oppressive kings, dictators, or other heads of state, but rather, my shepherd is Almighty God.

Note that this verse, in fact, the whole Psalm, is in the first person. The words are I and my. This is my declaration of trust and faith. It has nothing to do with whatever bodily remains may be residing in a casket or urn. When we read this Psalm, this is our declaration of faith. The Lord is my shepherd, it is God who guides me and watches over me. I shall not want, I shall lack nothing, I will not be in need. God will provide all that is needed to live securely. Don’t let the wording here confuse you. This is an older use of the word “want,” meaning to lack the necessities of life. The claim of this verse is not that God will give you anything and everything that you desire, but rather that you trust God to provide for your needs.

Verses two and three are often understood as being about tranquility and rest. After all, they speak of green pastures, lying down, still waters, and restoring my soul. But because we don’t live in a sheep herding culture, we tend to overlook that this is still about the image of shepherding sheep. Green pastures means that the sheep will have sufficient food to eat. That image is especially vivid for me after two weeks of driving past pastures of bare dirt or dead brown grass and seeing cattle with prominent ribs and sunken eyes. Lush green pastures are like a full pantry if you’re a sheep.

As humans, we all enjoy the tranquil wilderness scenes with trees and flowers reflected in the mirror of the surface of a still lake. It’s beautiful, of course, but beauty isn’t the point of the phrase here. For sheep, still waters aren’t a thing of beauty, but of necessity. Sheep are afraid to drink from a flowing stream. “Still waters” means that the sheep will have easy access to sufficient water to drink.

The shepherd restores my soul. There’s a small translation difficulty with this phrase. The ancient Hebrew has a wider meaning that the English indicates. The ancient Hebrews didn’t separate body and soul like the Greeks did later on. So the Hebrew text here has a wider meaning; it’s about body and soul as the intertwined components of life. The text is better heard as “keeps me alive,” or perhaps as we sometimes say, keeps body and soul together.

Continuing to read this psalm from the point of a sheep herding culture, the next phrase reads, “leads me in right paths.” The right path is important for sheep. The wrong path can separate you from the herd and from the shepherd. The right path leads to safety, security, shelter, and protection.

Then these two verses conclude with the phrase, “for his name’s sake.” God shepherds us, providing nature’s bounty to eat, clean water to drink, and guidance on safe pathways because it is God’s nature to do so. It’s God’s character to provide and work for life, “and God is characteristically and consistently committed to providing the fundamental necessities that make life possible.”¹

The shepherd and sheep image continues in verse four. “You are with me, your rod and your staff – they comfort me.” Now, a cowhand isn’t always out with the herd, but a shepherd is always with the sheep. And God’s presence is an unfailing presence, an abiding presence. The shepherd’s staff or crook isn’t just a walking stick for the shepherd to lean on. The shepherd uses it to prod the sheep in the right direction and the crook can snag a sheep and pull it back from danger. The rod was a shorter stick, perhaps more like a club used in defending the sheep. Oddly enough, the Hebrew word for rod here is the same word that refers to a king’s scepter, once again tying the image of king to the role of shepherd.

Sheep may have to pass through dark valleys where danger may lurk in the shadows as they are moved from pasture to pasture and from winter grazing lands to summer grazing at higher elevations. But the shepherd is with them to guide them and protect them. In the same way, says the psalmist, God’s presence calms my fears and comforts me.

And now the psalmist leaves the shepherd-sheep metaphor and recaps what has been said. Like those green pastures for the sheep, you prepare a table, that is, provide food. Like those still waters, my cup overflows with plenty to drink. Like the guidance and care for the sheep, you look after me with caring hospitality, anointing my head with oil. Goodness and mercy are a summary of God's character and they, that is, God, will pursue me all the days of my life. Follow is a wimpy and insufficient translation here. The concept is pursuit, chase after. And God persistently and consistently seeks us out, pursues us. All the days. Good days and bad days. Days when we seek God and days when we turn away. All the days of my life. Here and now. This life. All of this life. And I will dwell, I will live, in the house of the Lord, in the kingdom of God, my whole life long – this life, right now, every single day, all of my days.

Psalm 23 is a declaration of faith, a statement of trust, a confession declaring God's care, God's presence, God's providence. It's a simple poetic statement of fundamental truths, if we but have eyes to see and ears to hear. That's very difficult for us. Making a living is something we work hard to achieve. Success is measured by acquiring more and more. So it's hard to accept life as a gift, given to us along with what is needed to sustain life. And it's hard for us to even imagine being content with what we need. Henri Nouwen said, "Light and water, shelter and food, work and free time, children, parents, and grandparents, birth and death – it is all given to us. Why? So that we can say . . . thanks to God, thanks to each other, thanks to all and everyone."²

I challenge us all, myself included, to break the fetters we have placed on Psalm 23. Unshackle it. Break the chains that tie it to the funeral home and the intensive care unit at the hospital. Take it out of the cage where we have put it and open it up on all occasions. It speaks to our lives each and every day, not just when we are scared or hurt. Let it strengthen your relationship with our sovereign Lord, our Shepherd in every circumstance and in every moment. Amen.

Deuteronomy 2:7 NRS ⁷ Surely the LORD your God has blessed you in all your undertakings; he knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing."

^{NRS} **Jeremiah 23:1-5** Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD.

² Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³ Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. ⁵ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Ezekiel 34:20-24 NRS ²⁰ Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²² I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³ I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

¹ J. Clinton McCann Jr., *Great Psalms of the Bible* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2009) p 49

² Henri Nouwen, *Gracias! A Latin American Journal* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993) p 187