

# Psalm 23

**Introduction** – It is almost certainly the best-known, most frequently prayed and most widely memorized Psalm. Beautiful in its poetic imagery, beautiful in its meter, and beautiful in its message, the Psalm-singer leads us in a song of deep contentment, safety, and victory in Yahweh's presence, devotion, and personal care over us. The same imagery fills the Old and New Testament: the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

In Matthew 9:36-39 the theme of Jesus the Good Shepherd was especially related to that of evangelism and the sending of His apostles (10:6), and in 18:12-14 to the parable of the lost sheep and the devotion of the Shepherd. In Mark 6:34, 39 the association of the Good Shepherd is with the multiplication of loaves and of the flock reclining on green grass. Explicitly referred to as the chief and great Shepherd in 1 Pet 2:25, 5:4 and Heb 13:20, Jesus is certainly to be seen in Psalm 23. His under-shepherds are to imitate Him, shepherding and feeding His flock (1 Pet 5:2, John 21:15-17). And of course John records Jesus' treatment of several aspects of this image in John 10, His voice (vv3-5, 8, 14, 16, 27), His uniqueness (vv1-2, 8-10, 12-13), the giving of His life for His sheep (vv10-11, 14-15, 17-18), the gathering of the lost sheep into a single flock (v16), and their total security (vv28-29). The Lord Jesus Christ is my shepherd; I shall not want.

**The Lord, My Shepherd, and Sheep** – Yahweh, the name God used to reveal Himself to Moses in the burning bush, means, "I am who I am" and testifies to God's all-sufficiency and self-sufficiency, His transcendent wisdom, power, majesty and holiness in self-existence. This One is *my* shepherd, the Psalm-singer says. This One gave Himself for His sheep, not simply generally, but specifically and particularly. He is *my* Shepherd, pointing to His personal devotion and sacrificial love for me (Isaiah 40:11). But we also have to come to grips with the image of the congregation, and of ourselves individually, as sheep – this is not a compliment (Isaiah 53:6). Sheep are idiots, they are stubborn, they are easily distracted and led astray. They need constant attention, discipline, protection, and care.

All this does is highlight the first point: If I have Yahweh's self-sufficiency and majesty over me as a shepherd, then "*I shall not want.*" Even if I lack everything, because of my Good Shepherd, I lack nothing. Verses 2-6 explore the sufficiency of this Shepherd.

**What He Does** (vv2-3) – "*He makes me to lie down...He leads me...He restores me...He leads me...*" First, He leads me to a place of rest (Matt 11:28), fullness (John 6:35), and peace (John 14:27). We are all sheep; we have all wandered at times. We are all stubborn; we all need the loving, devoted care of our Shepherd. And these are the paths of righteousness, meaning they are also the places of a restored soul. Righteousness is not simply good while sin is bad. Righteousness is luxuriant, green, satisfying, fruitful, and restful. Sin is really stupid, like eating gravel. This righteousness runs deep, soul-deep. And this means that the fullness, the peace, the fruitfulness also run soul-deep.

**Why He Does This** – "*For His name's sake.*" God is jealous for His own glory, which is right and proper, for He is God. Why has He saved a stupid sheep like me? Not because of me, but "to the praise of the glory of His grace by which He made us accepted in the Beloved" (Eph 1:6).

**More Paths of Righteousness** (v4) – But life is not all green pastures and still waters, is it? Here the Psalm-singer turns from singing about God to singing to God, and here he seems to be speaking of his present situation, which is wonderfully applicable to us all in innumerable times and circumstances. Even "*through the valley of the shadow of death*" this Shepherd is with me. He never leaves you; He never forsakes you. These valleys are therefore a place where He is *leading* us, not *leaving* us – and He is leading us through them to some other place. Every trial up to and including death is, in the end, no death at all ("*for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*" – Paul), and so it is actually only *the shadow* of death.

**Comforting Rod** – It turns out these valleys are used by God like a rod and staff by a shepherd. They spur us along in Him and they bring us when we are wandering back to Him. They also number us as one of His, and so we know that when we are disciplined, we are loved (Heb 12:6).

**Preparing a Table** (vv5-6) – In the darkest of valleys, with enemies lined on every side, God prepares a table for us. That He *prepares* the table points to the fact that a victorious banqueting feast is in mind, with much care and anticipation – *even though the enemies are still present!* The world will persecute you; so will the flesh and the devil. But Jesus says, "I have overcome the world," as well as the flesh and the devil. The celebration is exuberant, over the top. "*You anoint my head with oil,*" either a sign of comfortable hospitality or a sign of priestly or kingly appointment – or possibly all of these. And "*my cup overflows,*" not only far better than I deserve, but "*exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think, according to the power that works in us,*" (Eph 4:20).

**Goodness and Mercy, and a Goal** – Because the LORD, because Yahweh is my shepherd, I know that "*surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*" Not only that, for that is only the beginning – the very beginning, the first paragraph of the Forward of the story of my life in this Good Shepherd's plan. For His home, His kingdom, His righteousness, His soul-restoring life will be my home, my dwelling place – forever.

I am a dumb, stubborn, wandering, forgetful, foolish sheep. But, God be praised, *the LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

Dave Hatcher – April 18, 2010