

The twenty-third psalm is one of the most quoted passages in all of Scripture. Often among the first memory verses of the young, quoted by the aged and used at funerals to comfort grieving friends and family, the psalm really isn't about death, but about living. Daily activities such as eating, drinking, and seeking security are put in a God-centered perspective. It shows each man's need for a "shepherd," for God's guidance and aid, as well as a close relationship with Him. It is a psalm of trust and confidence.

This psalm declares the happiness or blessedness of the man whom God protects and cares for. It is a psalm of complete trust, with no pleas made.

As familiar as the psalm is to so many, there is much more to its message than is generally assumed. It is not particularly the tranquil psalm many seem to see. It does tell what the Lord provides, but it also speaks of "the valley of the shadow of death," as well as of "evil" and "enemies" and issues that will so trouble and weary the soul that it must be "restored."

We have noted previously that the Book of Psalms, while not generally classed among the books of prophecy, nevertheless often is prophetic in its function. The twenty-third psalm is an excellent example of this, pointing forward to Jesus, the ultimate and incarnate image of the Divine Shepherd.

While the psalm is titled "A psalm of David" and certainly could

have been written by him about any of a number of experiences in his life, its authorship is not absolutely certain. The title could, conceivably mean a psalm *about* David or *for* David or the Davidic monarchy and all that entailed. On the other hand, David was as a boy a simple shepherd and as a man a shepherd-king, and in many ways, he served as a type of the Shepherd-Messiah to come. All this said, opinions will

vary and it is best not to be dogmatic about the human authorship.

Those who conclude David was the author still express a wide range of opinions about when it was written during his life. Some believe he wrote it as a youth, while out there on the Judean hills with his father's flock around him. Others surmise he wrote it as an old man, approaching the end of life, looking back at how God had cared for him. Still others guess that it might have been written during one of the challenging episodes of his life, such as when he faced Goliath. Each view is inconclusive, even as we measure their merits.

### Historical Background

It should be remembered that the early Israelites were a semi-nomadic people. The patriarchs had flocks and herds. Moses was called to his great mission to shepherd Israel out of Egypt while shepherding the flocks of his father-in-law in Midian. And, as mentioned earlier, David emerged in history as a shepherd boy to become the shepherd-king of Israel, a man after God's own heart.

## The Twenty-Third Psalm

### A Psalm of David

The LORD is my shepherd;  
I shall not want.  
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside the still waters.  
He restores my soul;  
He leads me in the paths of righteousness  
For His name's sake.  
Yea, 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 runs over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
All the days of my life;  
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD  
Forever.

While this psalm usually is read with the intent of making a very personal and individual application (“the Lord is *my* shepherd”), it may also be considered a reflection on Israel’s historical experience as God shepherded them through the Sinai wilderness, providing for their every need, and ultimately bringing them to possession of the land of Canaan. (Read Psalm 80, which even more clearly ties God’s shepherd role to the Exodus.)

If, indeed, part of this psalm is intended as historical reflection on the past, it is not unique here. Often in Scripture, faith and perseverance are urged for present and future by a backwards look to God’s workings and provision during the Exodus period. God’s past actions form the basis of confidence in His future actions. All trust is built in similar manner.

It would be a major omission to fail to recall that God Himself is often referred to, directly or indirectly, as the Shepherd of Israel (Pss. 74:1; 77:20; 78:52; 79:13; 80:1; Isa.40:11; Ezek. 34:6-19; Mic. 7:14). The very first allusions to God as shepherd may be found in Genesis 48:15 and 49:24.

A number of other psalms make reference to God’s people being the “sheep” of the Lord’s pasture (74:1; 79:13; 95:7; and 100:3-4). Thus, it is as important to absorb the concept of being sheep, metaphorically, as it is to envision God in the role of shepherd.

### The Shepherd Model

The shepherd of the Middle East guided and provided for his sheep. He would lead the sheep to often hard to find green pastures

in an otherwise rocky and barren landscape. He and the animals had to traverse craggy, dangerous mountain regions to find both grass and life-reviving water, so he had to find the safest path. He maintained his reputation or name as a capable and trustworthy shepherd by keeping the well-being of his charges uppermost in his priorities.

The shepherd’s job went beyond guidance and provision. He also had to be the comforter or protector of the flock. In dark, dangerous, gloomy valleys where wild animals or robbers might attack, he carefully led the flock, armed with his rod and staff to ward off enemies and rescue sheep that wandered or fell into places of danger.



The image of the shepherd is not always to be perceived as a gentle, pastoral one. It was sometimes a despised occupation. The shepherd often had to be rough and tough, to defend the sheep. David illustrated such toughness when he faced and killed Goliath, standing up for God’s sheep (frightened Israel). Such toughness gives the sheep reason not to fear.

### Structure of the Psalm

There is no complete consensus among students of this psalm about its structure, but two main views are held.

1. That the entire psalm speaks of God’s shepherd role.
2. That the psalm is divided into two parts:
  - God’s shepherd role, vv. 1-4
  - God’s role as “host” of His temple or dwelling among men, vv. 5-6

There is little disagreement about the first four verses, but considerable dispute about whether the last two continue the same focus, or refocus on the Lord’s provision at His temple.

One’s choice of views may be partially predicated by how the phrase “You prepare a table before me” is interpreted. If, as Arnold B. Rhodes suggests, it is a picture of a sheik-host to whose tent the psalmist has fled from his enemies, then a second figure, beyond that of the shepherd and sheep may be in view. It then would be a picture of a great banquet, gracious and protective hospitality and accompanying anointing with perfumed oil. Close fellowship with God is presented elsewhere in Scripture in the picture of a great feast.

On the other hand, if the “table” references the “tableland” or mesa-like areas in the mountains where the grass is abundant, the final verses may be a continuation of the shepherd-sheep theme. Or, one may need to consider a mixing of metaphors.

Either view largely conveys the picture of fellowship with God, of dwelling with Him in His “house.” Again, whether that house is the tabernacle/temple, specifically, or just the general idea of being in the Lord’s presence, is open to discussion.

## God's Name in the Psalm

In this psalm, where we see the word LORD, the actual Hebrew word is one of seven variations of God's name, Jehovah.

- Jehovah-rohi, the Lord my shepherd, v. 1
- Jehovah-shalom, the Lord my peace, v. 2 (cf. Judg. 6:24)
- Jehovah-ropheka, the Lord my health, v. 3 (cf. Exod. 15:26)
- Jehovah-tsidkenu, the Lord my righteousness, v. 3 (cf. Jer. 23:6)
- Jehovah-shammah, the Lord my companion, v. 4 (cf. Ezek. 48:35)
- Jehovah-nissi, the Lord my victory, v. 5 (cf. Exod. 17:15)
- Jehovah-jireh, the Lord my provision, v. 6 (cf. Gen. 22:14)

## Key Ideas in the Psalm

A number of highly emotive concepts and phrases make this psalm both highly memorable and instructive.

### The Lord is my shepherd

If one declares this truth, it means the Lord:

- Owns you and controls your life
- Commands and we listen to His voice and obey His commands

### I shall not want

This is the central message of the psalm. With the Lord as shepherd, the sheep lack nothing. The apostle Paul wrote the same idea in Philippians 4:19.

### He makes me lie down in green pastures

There is an interesting fact about sheep. They will not lie down when they are hungry. But, when they have eaten and are full, they will lie down in the abundant grass.

### He leads me by the still waters

Sheep farmers and herders tell us that sheep won't drink from rushing, roaring streams. In the

mountains of Palestine, shepherds often had to dam mountain streams to provide still water for their sheep. Still waters bring to mind peace of mind, calmness, and serenity. Again, we see parallel promises in the New Testament (Phil. 4:6-7; John 14:27).

### He restores my soul

When does a sheep need to be restored? In the language of sheep rearing, a "cast sheep" is one that has gotten down and can't get up on its own. Without help it could easily just die in that position. Such is a beautiful analogy for the Christian, who can "get down" either in spirit or through sinful behavior and not be able to get up without aid. In Luke 15 Jesus tells the story of the man with 100 sheep who leaves the 99 to rescue or restore the one lost.

The word "restores" is a much stronger term than it might first appear. In Hebrew it literally means "he brings back my soul" or "turns back to the starting point." Thus it speaks of either a restoration of life itself, or at least life's vitality through rescue or a healing of wounds.

## New Testament Comparison

What sort of terms can you think of in the New Testament that describe a restoration of life, effected by Christ?

### He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake

The Lord's leading is another central theme of this psalm. Sheep are "led," not "driven," so the shepherd must go ahead of the flock. Think of how true this is of Jesus. Look particularly at John 14:1-3.

"For his name's sake" impresses the idea that what is at stake in

life is not the fulfillment of human will, but God's will, so that God's name, glory, and wisdom will be extolled to all men.

### Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death

Palestine had many dark, dangerous valleys through which sheep had to travel. Yet, with the Lord as shepherd the danger is totally mitigated. Again, the New Testament teaches the same principle in Hebrews 13:5-6.

Also, observe Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 9:1-2, as recorded in Matthew 4:15-16 and consider whether the context is the same or different.

## Discuss

How differently the Christian views death than the non-Christian?

### His rod and staff comfort me

Whether two different objects are in mind here is open to debate. However, the shepherd's rod or staff was a tool of defense, a weapon of power, and a symbol of authority. And, in this manifold way they comforted the sheep. The crook in the rod is believed to have been used to rescue sheep from crevices and pits.

### You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies

As discussed earlier, the "table" may be viewed a couple of different ways. Key to either view is the fact that the Lord has "prepared" this table for His sheep. And, these blessings were prepared while our enemies were standing about us. The parallels in the work of Jesus are notable.

The concept of eating with the Lord is threaded throughout Scripture, from the animal sacrifices used in Old Testament worship, many of

which were shared between God and the people (fat burned and rose as sweet smell to Lord and people ate remainder) to the Lord's Supper or communion meal of the New Testament. Such meals or the symbolism inherent in them, reflect a close relationship. Christians are urged to hospitality, to reflect or create similar loving, caring relationships. Enemies are unable to impede God's provision.

### Sing "Higher Ground"

Notice the phrase in the chorus that reads: "Lord, lift me up and let me stand, by faith, on heaven's tableland."

What do you think that means?

### You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over

Anointing with oil had more than one purpose. Kings and priests were anointed to initiate their service to God. The term "Christ" means "anointed." Oil also was used medicinally and in hospitality, and the idea of a cup running over reiterates the idea of abundant provision by God.

With this line and those that follow, the psalmist's delight in God reaches its climax. Having reflected on God's present and former provision, he now makes a trusting mental leap into the future and foresees God's eternal provision.

### Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life

You can hear the sense of confident trust, the certainty, and hope in these words. The words also carry a sense of thankfulness and ought to describe the life of everyone who follows in the Lord's steps.

### And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever

To live in the Lord's house is to be in His presence. God planted His tabernacle in the very midst of Israel's tents in the wilderness. His temple was built in the capital of the nation. Here is painted the picture of perfectly satisfied sheep looking to the future. Again, one can easily leap from the original picture in ancient Israel to the spiritual condition of the Christian. This desire to perpetually be in the Lord's house is a repeated theme of the psalms (27:4; 26:8; 65:4; 84:4).

And Christians should not fail to comprehend that the church is described as the "house of God" (1 Tim. 3:15).

### The Psalm Can Be Read from Many Points of View

A survey of commentators on the psalm reveals a myriad of ideas about the original context of this famous song. And, while good interpretative protocol calls for trying to establish the writer's original meaning and application, that seems nearly impossible in this case, because the psalm itself gives us little or no explicit information about what triggered its expression.

Among the ideas suggested as the historical root of the psalm are: (1) The Exodus of Israel from Egypt; (2) when David was fleeing from King Saul; (3) the period when David was fleeing from his son Absalom; (4) the time of Israel's return from Exile. It is relatively easy to see any of these fitting the thoughts expressed in the psalm.

Yet, the psalm's indefinite nature makes it capable of transcending any single historical event. The psalm can be, and often is, applied with a purely Christian perspective, without any harm.

### Singing the Psalms

Sing the following in class.

"The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want"

"Jesus the Loving Shepherd"?

The poetic form gives license for millions, if not billions, of individuals to particularize its meaning in the context of their own experiences with God. In this way, perhaps, the psalm helps explain the living nature of God's word, as Hebrews 4:12 explains, "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

### Foreshadowing of New Testament Concepts

Out of the types and shadows of the Old Testament emerge even more concrete images of God's shepherd role. From physical imagery we are catapulted in the New Testament to even higher truth. Jesus announced Himself as the "good shepherd" who "gives His life for the sheep." He knows His sheep and they know His voice. He gives them "eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:1-30).

Jesus is a shepherd not only in the feeding and guiding aspect, but more especially in protecting and comforting and rescuing. "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in

His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20-21).

Peter describes Jesus as the “chief shepherd” (1 Pet. 5:4) and the “shepherd and bishop of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25). His description of Jesus in the first case follows His inspired direction to the elders of the church to “shepherd the flock of God which is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). See also Acts 20:28.

### Message for Today

The twenty-third psalm is extremely relevant today. While American ideals and mythology accentuate independence and self-sufficiency, the truth of Jeremiah 10:23 remains just that—truth. “O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps.”

And, the psalm, while written long before the coming of Jesus,

seems yet to foretell our need for the “good shepherd” (John 10:11, 14). Isaiah, in particular, alluded to this development of the “shepherd” concept when he clearly pointed to the Christ, saying, “All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (53:6). Read also Matthew 9:36.

### Homework and Questions

*Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.*

1. After reading this psalm again, write down any situation that has arisen in your past or present life where the ideas and emotions of this psalm have been a comfort or help to you. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What is the most important message in this psalm to you? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What characteristics do sheep have that make them an excellent metaphor of the human condition? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. In what ways would Israel, while in the Sinai desert, have been like sheep and God like a shepherd? List some of the things God did for Israel in the wilderness that parallel the message of Psalm 23. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. In what ways were the kings of Israel to function like shepherds? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. List all the ways you can think of in which Jesus fulfills the model of the shepherd. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. How do you “feel” when you read this psalm? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. How does this psalm address human weakness? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. How might the “valley of the shadow of death” be viewed, beyond the issue of physical death? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. How does this psalm express gratitude? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_