

The Good Shepherd

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 may be the most quoted passage in all of Scripture. Its beauty is matched by its depth as David describes the good Shepherd leading His sheep in the way of the cross.

Summary of the Text

David calls Yahweh his shepherd, so he will not lack for anything (v. 1). The Lord takes him to pleasant places: to lie down in green pastures, beside still waters, in replenishment of his soul, in paths of righteousness for His name's sake (vv. 2-3). The shepherd's presence is not diminished in dark places including the valley of the shadow of death. He walks there as the Lord's rod and staff provide comfort and therefore he fears no evil (v. 4). Even in the company of enemies, the Lord's sets a table to nourish him, anoints his head with oil, and blesses him abundantly (v. 5). He knows goodness and mercy will be with him all of his days and he'll dwell in God's house forever (v. 6).

Green Pastures

The comparison of God's people to sheep should provide us some self-awareness. Sheep are not the sharpest tools in the shed. They face danger from weather, predators, and their own ignorance. If we need a literal reference, Paul says "not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty" (1 Cor. 1:26-27). "Not many" means some were wise and noble according to the world, but they had to be humbled like a little child to enter the kingdom. We shouldn't be insulted by being labeled sheep but rather floored by the fact that our creator cares for us a divine shepherd. Hirelings run away when a wolf arrives, but Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (Jn. 10:11-12). He came to seek out the lost sheep of the house of Israel, believers who are disconnected from the Lord and His people (Matt. 15:24). How do we get lost? Despise the flock, ignore the shepherd, stop worshiping and lay your Bible aside for a couple years and you will wander off into all kinds of confusion, pain, and misery. People leave the body of Christ for various reasons—insecurity, ignorance, flat out rebellion—but Jesus says His sheep know His voice and He calls them by name and leads them out (Jn. 10:3). The identity of corporate Israel as God's flock and the people of His pasture (cf. Pss. 100:3, 80:1) does not set aside the necessity for every true sheep to call the Lord "my shepherd." The sheep know and love Jesus, but the goats do not (Matt. 25:33ff.). As the good shepherd, Christ gives Himself and every other blessing that necessarily comes from Him. He is the gospel, the new heavens and the new earth, the green pastures: "Then Jesus said to the twelve, 'Do you also want to go away?' But Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'" (Jn. 6:67-68). Paths of righteousness are like still waters and verdant fields that are not just beautiful but also refreshing, strengthening, and productive. We tread these paths to glorify His name.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

A valley is a deep place with limited visibility. If you walk in one beneath the shadow of death, it means there's a good chance you are going to die. David makes the bold confession that in that valley "I will fear no evil for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (v. 4). The good shepherd isn't urging the fearful to think happy thoughts or look on the bright side. This is a confession of faith, of trust in the one he knows is with him. Jesus came to defeat death and liberate us from fearing it: "Inasmuch then as the children have

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partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:14-15). This doesn’t give the sheep a death-wish, but because we know that to die is gain, we’d rather die than be unfaithful to Christ. This conviction and the courage that follows it must be cultivated. David says the Lord’s rod and staff comfort him. The Lord disciplines everyone He loves, and those who are His must receive and endure it this way (Heb. 12:6-8). The rod corrects and the staff directs. We need to repent of our sins and head the right direction. Why would David find comfort in the Lord’s rod and staff? Because they are every bit as much a means of grace as the green pastures and calm waters. Just as a father who spares the rod hates his son (Prov. 13:24), so we would be forsaken by God if He did not intervene in our foolishness and call us back to Him. Parents therefore must lovingly and firmly discipline their children not only to be obedient, but to provide the security. When a sheep wanders, the shepherd leaves the 99 and goes after him. In the church, the elders are under-shepherds who are told to watch out for souls as those who will give an account (Heb. 13:7). We are known and loved by God, and therefore we must know and love one another.

The Table

The Lord doesn’t simply see us through hard things. He set a banquet for us in the middle of it all (v. 5). Jesus tells us to rejoice when enemies attack because we are blessed: “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12). This is counterintuitive. When reviled or even slighted, we either feel like returning the favor or like remaining wounded and discouraged. When others are accused of something, many will conclude, “They must have done something to deserve it.” David and Job and Jesus teach us otherwise. David knows that the godly are capable of great sin, as he was, but they’re also capable of faithfulness, and faithfulness to Christ invites scorn. If you got a promotion or great news of success, how would you celebrate? Do that in the shadow of death. When someone attacks you undeservedly or lies about you, thank God and celebrate. Pray for, associate with, and encourage those who are dealing with the same thing. The good shepherd anoints us with comfort and power by the Spirit and He fills our cup to overflowing, like the wine at Cana. It’s in the presence of your enemies that you gain assurance of God’s goodness and mercy will relentlessly pursue you all the days of your life and dwell in the house of the Lord forever.