

LIVING WITH CONFIDENCE IN GOD

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is the best known and most beloved of the psalms. CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON aptly called it “the pearl of the psalms.” It is arguably the most famous and cherished scripture in the Bible. It is the John 3:16 of the Old Testament. The young and old know it. Seasoned saints, new Christians, and irreligious people are familiar with it. It is memorized by children, recited at weddings, read at sickbeds, preached at funerals, and consulted in counseling. In *God’s Psychiatry*, CHARLES L. ALLEN went so far as to say, “If people would repeat Psalm 23 seven times before they go to sleep each night, we would rarely see an emotional breakdown.” Without a doubt, Psalm 23 is one of the greatest poems and most inspiring psalms ever written. It is known around the world and has been appreciated throughout the ages. But it is not a song that everyone can sing. Psalm 23 is the exclusive testimony of those who have a personal relationship with the living God.

The ascription above verse 1 labels Psalm 23 “A PSALM OF DAVID.” That’s all we know about the historical background of this psalm. We do not know if David composed it as a young shepherd boy or as a wise old king. We do not know if David wrote it during a period of tranquil reflection or in a season of threatening difficulties. But this does not hinder our ability to understand or appreciate this psalm. To the contrary, it helps us to relate to it in a more personal way. Whatever David’s personal circumstances, he was able to say, “*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*” Is that your testimony? Can you say that the Lord is your shepherd?

John R.W. Stott wisely commented, “The Christian cannot read or sing this psalm without thinking of Jesus Christ, who dared to reapply the metaphor from Jehovah to Himself.” In John 10:11, Jesus said, “*I am the good shepherd. The Good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*” Hebrews 13:20 says that Jesus is the great shepherd. And 1 Peter 5:4 says that he is the chief shepherd. But is the Lord *your* shepherd? Do you have a personal relationship with the living God? Have you put your trust in the Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord? Again, CHARLES SPURGEON wrote, “If he be a shepherd to no one else, he is a shepherd to me. He cares for me, watches over me, and preserves me.” Can you say that? If not, then I plead with you to repent of your sins, run to the cross, and put your faith in Jesus for salvation from the holy wrath of God. And you will discover more and more each day that the Lord is worthy of your trust. Psalm 23 testifies to the fact that the Lord watches over, walks with, and welcomes in those who trust in him.

I. THE LORD WATCHES OVER THOSE WHO TRUSTS IN HIM.

A young boy was to recite Psalm 23 during a Sunday school program. And the nervous youth forgot the opening line of the psalm. But he came up with a novel version: “THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD; I SHALL NOT WORRY ABOUT IT.” He missed the exact words of the psalm but caught the exact sense of it. If the Lord is your shepherd, you

really have nothing to worry about. RAY STEDMAN wrote, “There are really only two options in life. If the Lord is my shepherd, then I shall not want. But if I am in want, then it is obvious that the Lord is not my shepherd. It’s that simple! If there’s emptiness, loneliness, dissatisfaction, and frustration in our lives, then the Lord is not our shepherd. If we look to anyone or anything other than God as our shepherd, we will never be satisfied.” These words may sound harsh, but they are true. There is nothing, no one in this life that can bring true satisfaction – only God. Those who trust in the Lord can live with confidence that the Lord is watching over you.

A. THE LORD WATCHES OVER OUR *PHYSICAL* NEEDS.

Verse 2 says, “*He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.*” These two statements continue the shepherd-sheep metaphor to describe how the Lord watches over the physical needs of those who trust in him. First, THE LORD PROVIDES NOURISHMENT. Sheep are not able to hunt down or dig up their own food. They need a shepherd to find pastures for them to graze. And it must be green pastures, because hungry sheep will satisfy their hunger in the wrong places. So the faithful shepherd leads his sheep to green pastures. And once he leads them to green pastures, he makes them lie down in it. The shepherd knows what is best for the sheep. He knows the road ahead. He knows that tired and hungry sheep will not make the journey. So he makes them lie down in green pastures. This is how the Lord works in our lives. He makes us lie down in green pastures.

Likewise, THE LORD PROVIDES REFRESHMENT. Once the sheep have satisfied their hunger and renewed their strength in the green pastures, they need something to drink. So the shepherd leads them beside still waters. And just as the pastures must be green, the waters must be still water. When thirsty sheep wade into running waters, their coats become wet. They lose their balance and fall into the water and drown. So the good shepherd dams up the brook, transforming rushing waters into a quiet stream so the sheep can get a drink in safety. This is how the Lord watches over our physical needs. He makes us lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside still waters.

B. THE LORD WATCHES OVER OUR *SPIRITUAL* NEEDS.

Verse 3 says, “*He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.*” In this verse, David drops the shepherd-sheep metaphor in order to make it clear that the Lord can also be trusted to care for your spiritual needs. First, THE LORD PROVIDES RESTORATION WHEN YOU STRAY AWAY. In verses 1-2, David describes how good his shepherd is. The shepherd fully satisfies every need for nourishment and refreshment. Yet there are times when the sheep stray away. But this is not a negative reflection on the shepherd. The shepherd is unceasingly and unimpeachably good. But even though the shepherd is good, sheep are still sheep. So there are times when the sheep look for nourishment in barren pastures. And there

are times when the sheep look for refreshment in polluted wells. Isaiah 53:6 says, *“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.”* We are all like sheep that have gone astray. And we have intentionally turned away from God into iniquity. But the good shepherd does not leave us or forsake us. He restores our souls. He leaves his ninety-nine other sheep and goes looking for the one that is lost. He lays our iniquity on the Lord Jesus Christ.

THE LORD ALSO PROVIDES GUIDANCE TO KEEP YOU FROM STRAYING AWAY. Verse 3 says, *“He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”* There are three assurances in this statement. First of all, it tells us that God faithfully leads those who trust in him. The even better news is that he leads in the paths of righteousness. God leads in straight paths. You can trust God to do what is right. But the best news of all is that he leads us in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. In his book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, W. PHILLIP KELLER tells how shepherds would raise sheep for their wool. He would then lead them to the market to sell their coats. But the shepherd would choose his path carefully. If he showed up with wounded or maimed sheep, it would hurt his profits. So he would lead his sheep in straight paths to the marketplace. But at some point the merchants would no longer examine the sheep. They would just accept them on the reputation of the shepherd – for his name’s sake. This is how the Lord leads – in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. His reputation is at stake. His word is on the line. The wife of physicist ALBERT EINSTEIN was once asked if she understood her husband’s theory of relativity. “No, I don’t,” she replied, “but I know my husband. If he says it’s true, you can trust him.” That’s the way you ought to trust God.

II. THE LORD WALKS WITH THOSE WHO TRUSTS IN HIM.

The first three verses of Psalm 23 declare that God is worthy of your trust because God is good, faithful, and sufficient. But when you get to verse 4, the scene shifts. David is no longer in green pastures or by still waters. He is now in a dark valley. But David’s confidence in God does not change in the valley. Verse 4 says, *“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.”* There is bad news and good news here.

A. YOUR TRUST IN GOD WILL NOT KEEP YOU FROM GOING THROUGH THE VALLEYS OF LIFE.

After his son died of a rare aging disease, HAROLD KUSHNER wrote the bestseller, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. Unfortunately, Kushner gave the wrong answer to this important question. In fact, the question itself is a bit misleading. It implies that good people, whoever they are, should be exempt from experiencing bad things. But that’s just not true. Job 5:7 says, *“But man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.”* And Job 14:1 says, *“Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.”* Did you get that? Bad things don’t just happen to bad

people. They happen to all people. Mark it down. God only had one child who lived in this world without sin – Jesus. But God has no children who live in this world without suffering – including Jesus! Bad things happen to all people.

David admits, almost reluctantly, that there are times when he has to go through the valley. But this is not an indictment against the goodness of the shepherd. And David is not confessing that he is in the valley because he has strayed away. In verse 3, David clearly says, *“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”* But there are times when the righteous ways of God requires that he lead his sheep through the valley of the shadow of death. This phrase, *“the shadow of death,”* is a poetic way of describing deep darkness. It is to be in a valley that is so dark that it seems the shadow of death has hidden the sunshine. This phrase can apply to death itself. But it is meant to speak of any dark situation where you cannot see your way.

- A sick bed can be the valley of the shadow of death.
- A broken heart can be the valley of the shadow of death.
- Divorce court can be the valley of the shadow of death.
- An unmet need can be the valley of the shadow of death.
- The unemployment line can be the valley of the shadow of death.
- The death of a loved-one can be the valley of the shadow of death.
- The loss of your reputation can be the valley of the shadow of death.

I repeat: Your trust in God will not keep you from going through the valleys of life. But remember that it is only a shadow. JOHN PHILLIPS said it well, “The shadow of a dog cannot bite, the shadow of a sword cannot kill, and the shadow death cannot harm the child of God.” So while there may be times when you have to go through the valley of the shadow of death, I have good news for you...

B. YOUR TRUST IN GOD WILL KEEP YOU FROM LIVING IN FEAR OF THE DANGERS THAT THREATEN YOU IN THE VALLEY.

David does have any control over his reality. The shepherd has led him into the valley. But David was in control of his response to his reality. And David chose not to be afraid of the evil, dangerous, or threatening things that were lurking in the valley, because David was not going through the valley by himself. And if you are trusting in the Lord, neither are you.

THE LORD IS PRESENT TO HELP YOU. David says that he is not afraid of any evils thing in the valley because his shepherd was with him.

One day, a beautiful woman walked down the street. A guy noticed her and asked if he could accompany her. She declined, stating that someone was going to walk with her. He watched her walk down the street. But no one joined her. So he overtook her and confronted her with her apparent lie. “You said someone was going to be with you,” he complained, “but I didn’t see any one join you.” She agreed. But added, “Rest assure, whenever you see me, I have someone with me.”

That is the believer's testimony. Whatever your valley may be, know that you are not in it by yourself. You are not walking alone. The Lord is with you. Psalm 16:8 says, *"I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken."* Psalm 46:1 says, *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."* Isaiah 8:10 says, *"Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us."* And Isaiah 41:10 says, *"For not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."*

THE LORD IS PREPARED TO HELP YOU. JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE wisely commented, "We are never so conscious of the presence of God as when we pass through life's valleys." Indeed, there are many people who think that God has left them when they go through the valley. But those who live with confidence in God often find that God draws near when you are going through the valley. David says, *"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."* The rod and staff were the basic equipment a shepherd carried to care of his sheep. His rod – a club – was in one hand. And his staff – a long stick – was in his other hand. In other words, the shepherd did not travel empty-handed. David says, "I am comforted. My heart is at ease. I know that everything is going to be all right. Why? Because my shepherd has his rod and his staff."

III. THE LORD WELCOMES IN THOSE WHO TRUSTS IN HIM.

Psalm 23 is called THE SHEPHERD'S PSALM, because of the beautiful picture it paints of the shepherd's faithful oversight of his sheep. But there are actually two word-pictures in Psalm 23. In verses 1-4, the Lord is described as a good shepherd. But in verses 5-6, the Lord is described as a gracious host. At verse 5, the setting suddenly shifts. We are no longer sheep in God's flock. We are now guests in God's house. And the final verses of Psalm 23 testify to the Lord's generous and continual hospitality.

A. YOU CAN LIVE IN THE ABUNDANCE OF GOD'S GENEROUS HOSPITALITY.

Verse 5 says, *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."* This verse describes three ways in which the Lord demonstrates his generous hospitality to those who trust in him. David says...

LOOK AT MY ENEMIES. David pictures himself as a guest in the court of a monarch. The host has prepared a banquet feast and invited David to the table. But some of David's enemies were there too. So he had a decision to make. Will he flee the presence of his enemies? Or will he enjoy the hospitality of his host? David chose to enjoy the hospitality of his host in spite of the presence of his enemies. The binding custom of ancient hospitality required that the host take personal responsibility for his guest. So, literally, David's enemies were not really his

enemies. They were now the enemies of his host. So David was able to enjoy the meal in spite of his enemies, because he was confident that the Lord had his enemies under control.

LOOK AT MY HEAD. In our day, basic hospitality involves taking a person's coat and offering your guest something to drink. But in the ancient Near East, the custom was to wash your guests' feet from the dust and dirt of the roads and to anoint their heads with fragrant oil. The washing of feet was a basic, hygienic courtesy. But the anointing of the head with oil was an extravagant act of generous hospitality. To express how glad and honored he was to have the guest in his home, the host would have one of his servants to anoint the guest's head with oil. But David says to the Lord, *"You anoint my head with oil."*

LOOK AT MY CUP. When scripture uses the word *"cup"* metaphorically, as it does here, it refers to one's lot in life, one's circumstances, or even one's final destiny. In Matthew 26:39, Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, *"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."* One's cup refers to the circumstances of one's life. And David says, *"My cup overflows."* Here, again, we see a picture of God's extravagant generosity. If the Lord gave David what he deserved, David's cup would have been filled with wrath, judgment, and condemnation. Instead, God took out of the cup what David deserved. And he did not leave the cup empty. He poured in blessings, goodness, mercy, compassion, and favor. But he didn't just fill David's cup halfway. He filled it to the brim. And after David's cup was full, the Lord kept pouring in blessings until the cup overflowed.

B. YOU CAN LIVE IN ANTICIPATION OF GOD'S CONTINUED HOSPITALITY.

Psalm 23 is a great comfort to people in a season of grief. But it is unfortunate that so many people only think of it at funerals. Psalm 23 focuses on what Jesus does for us throughout our lives, not just at dying time. Here is the open-secret for a happy life, death, and eternity. Verse 6 closes this psalm by declaring God's faithfulness through everyday and throughout eternity. You can count on God every day. There are very few things in life that we can really count on. Your health may fail you. Your money may run out. Your loved-ones may forsake you. But you can count on God. Verse 6 says, *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."* Goodness and mercy are twin attributes of God. CHARLES SPURGEON called them "God's footmen" that follow God's children every day. But why do I need them both? Wouldn't goodness alone be enough? No. You need goodness and mercy. JOHN PHILLIPS said it well, "Goodness takes care of my steps; mercy takes care of my stumbles." You need goodness to help you stay on your feet and walk according to the will of God. But you need to mercy to help you when you have fallen down. Mercy will pick you up and give you a new start.

But not only can you count on God throughout this life; you can also count on God beyond this life. You can count on God for all eternity. Verse 6 says, *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* This closing statement of Psalm 23 reminds us that when

the Lord embraces you, he will never change his mind about you. GEORGE MATHESON had been partially blind all of his life. But somewhere around the age of 18 or 20, he totally lost his sight. Life went on. He continued his theological studies and served the Lord in pastoral ministry. But he never married. Matheson was engaged as a young man. But when he became blind, his fiancée broke off their relationship. And it is said that this painful experience was the inspiration that led him to write the hymn:

O LOVE THAT WILL NOT LET ME GO, I REST MY WEARY SOUL IN THEE
I GIVE THEE BACK THE LIFE I OWE, THAT IN THINE OCEAN DEPTHS ITS FLOW
MAY RICHER, FULLER BE.

Because God's love will not let us go, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. But there may be another way to read this closing line of Psalm 23. It may be David's promise to the Lord, rather than a divine promise from the Lord. It may be that David is saying that his gracious host is so good to him that he will never leave the Lord's house. It's like Peter's response when the Lord asked the disciples were they going to leave him. Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" There is no alternative in the world that offers what the Lord provides. In other words, there is nobody like Jesus.

My father used to tell a story about two flocks of sheep that grazed in fields adjacent to one another. One flock was filled with strong, healthy sheep that were cared for by a faithful shepherd. The other flock was filled with weak, sickly sheep that suffered because of the carelessness of their negligent shepherd. One day, a weak sheep made its way to the fence that separated the two flocks and collapsed. And the strong sheep on the other side of the fence all passed by and mocked the sickly sheep. Finally, the strongest of the sheep stood before the dying sheep. Looking up, the poor sheep said, "Go ahead, join the others in mocking me." But the strong sheep said, "I will not, for if it were not for my shepherd, I would be just like you." This is the testimony of every person who trusts in the Lord.