

“The Twenty-Third Psalm”

Acts 2:42-47 • Psalm 23 • 1 Peter 2:19-25 • John 10:1-10

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The twenty-third Psalm is one of the most well-known passages in the Bible. Countless people through the centuries have committed these six verses to memory. It has been set to music time and time again – by classical composers like Johann Sebastian Bach, Antonin Dvořák, Franz Schubert, and many others; liturgical composers like John Rutter, and popular musicians like Duke Ellington. Other musicians have used words from a portion of the psalm, as U2 did in their song “Love Rescue Me.” We routinely say these words at memorial services. These are words that have spoken meaningfully to millions upon millions of people – both Jews and Christians – through more than twenty centuries.

The psalm begins with the words “The Lord.” The word “Lord” is often in small caps because it is the divine name, the name that God revealed to Moses. The Hebrew letters are YHWH, from which we get the name “Yahweh,” and the later variation, “Jehovah.” This divine name is so sacred to Jews that they will not pronounce it. They substitute the word “Adonai,” which means, “My Lord.”

“The Lord is my shepherd.” This simple affirmation says not just that God is *like* a shepherd – feeding, tending, nurturing, guiding, and protecting a flock from danger – but that God *is* a shepherd. Not just any shepherd: “*my* shepherd.” This psalm was written by someone who felt personally close to God. The heading to the psalm says it is “A Psalm of David,” which just means that it was written *in the style* of David, or *in the tradition* of David. It doesn’t really matter who wrote it. Whenever we say the words “The Lord is my shepherd,” it becomes personal; it becomes about *our* relationship to God.

So picture yourself as part of a flock that God is tending. Are you hungry? God will make sure you get fed. Are you lost? God will guide you home. Are you caught in some brambles? God will free you. Are you hurting? God will tend to your wounds. Are you in danger? God will protect you.

“I shall not want.” The verb means to be “lacking” something, to be “without.” The Psalm is saying that because God is our shepherd, there is *nothing* we will ever truly need that we will not have. God *will provide* for our needs. That doesn’t negate the reality that some people on Earth are hungry or thirsty, some people lack a roof over their heads, or other basic necessities. Part of what God does as shepherd is compel *other* people to be generous, to come to the aid of the poor and the oppressed. As long as there are people who don’t have basic necessities for life, the church’s job is not yet done.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.” Envision a pleasant meadow, a gentle stream, a calm and beautiful spring day. God *makes* us lie down – is this something God *forces* us to do? No, I think it’s something God *invites* us to do, like when Jesus *invited* the crowds to sit down on the mountain. Whether or not we go to the places where God invites us, the places that nourish our soul and bring us peace, is really up to us. We can choose to take advantage of the

great outdoors. God has created an incredibly majestic and beautiful world. God even told us that we should take one full day each week as simply a day of *rest*, a day devoid of any work. But many of us in today's world are so busy that we miss out on much of the beauty that surrounds us day after day.

“He restores my soul.” This is God's desire for us, to *restore* our weary souls, to *refresh* us after long, hard days at work, or after our bodies have fought off an illness or a disease, or have healed from some injury, or after we have lost someone we dearly love. All sorts of events and circumstances in this life press us and press us hard, causing immense amounts of stress or pain, tearing at the fabric of our souls. But God, our shepherd, invites us to healing, to refreshment, to restoration. That could take a variety of forms. A doctor, a therapist, a counselor. A retreat. A vacation. A change of jobs. Some extended time away. God tells us what we need for the good of our souls. Sometimes God is practically shouting at us, imploring us to seek some solace and peace; the question, really, is whether we're listening. What is your *body* telling you that you need? What do your thoughts and feelings reveal? What are you writing about in your journal? What kind of restoration does your soul need?

“He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.” Literally, “he leads me in *paths of righteousness* for his name's sake.” God has given us all sorts of instruction. *Righteousness* is one of the central themes of the Bible. Any Christian worthy of the name is making a diligent effort to live a righteous life, and to continually address those areas of their life that lack righteousness. That should be an ongoing process throughout the whole of our lives. There's always *something* we need to be working on in our efforts to live righteously. If we say “The Lord is my shepherd,” we're saying that we do want to do what our Shepherd asks of us, no matter how hard it may be to change. God does all this *for the sake of* his name. When we call ourselves “Christians,” we are identifying ourselves with *Christ*. If our lives lack righteousness, it is a blight on Christ himself. It is a discredit to his name.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley” – or “the valley of the shadow of death” – “I fear no evil.” There are times we have to walk through some *incredibly* dark valleys. Some of you are going through a dark valley right now. There are also times when we face “the shadow of death,” when someone very close to us dies, or when we face the reality of our own mortality. Yet we will “fear no evil.” Why not? Why won't we be afraid of the evil forces that are very real and that are very much at work in our world? Two reasons. First, “you are with me.” There is *no time in our life* when God is *not present* with us. God is always *right here*. We might not always *feel* that presence. Sometimes we have walked away; we have failed to keep God central in our lives. Other times, we have been very faithful, and *still* God feels absent. God is not going to intervene in every situation. The Psalms themselves bear witness to that. The Psalms are *so* human; they bear such *rich* testimony to the hard realities of life, and even to the times when it feels like God just isn't there. When you're feeling abandoned by God, turn back to the Psalms. You will find passages that speak to *any* situation you find yourself in. God is *always* with you, even if God doesn't seem to be answering your prayers. That's one reason why we shouldn't be afraid. The second is this: “your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” A shepherd carried around two primary tools. The *rod* was a stick or a club. It was what the shepherd used when *danger* threatened the flock, like ravenous wolves. The Shepherd sometimes has to beat back the forces of evil. The danger is greater than what we, the sheep, can handle. God protects us, shields us from harm, fights off the forces of darkness, and often we're not aware of it. There are things going on in the spiritual realm that we can't see but that are *very* consequential. God's army of angels are *busy*. Our Shepherd has a rod, and he *uses* it when he needs to. Our Shepherd also has a *staff*. This is the second tool, the one we're probably more familiar with; the shepherd's crook, what the shepherd uses to guide the sheep in the right direction. One tool protects the sheep; the other nurtures the sheep. God uses both, keeping many dangers at bay, and leading us in the right way. Of course, the rod

doesn't protect us from *all* dangers. Horrible things still happen. Sometimes we experience terrible pain. Eventually, we all die. But, thanks to the Shepherd, death is not the end. God has beaten down death, through the resurrection of Christ. Even when evil does its worst, God *will* bring us home.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Sometimes there are people that are very adversarial, very hostile, towards us. Yet God still provides. As the forces of darkness swirled against Jesus during his final days on earth, Jesus gathered with his closest followers for a sacred meal. When you are facing hostility, look around for the nourishment that God still provides.

"You anoint my head with oil." Usually in the Old Testament, it is priests and kings who receive the oil of anointing, and sometimes prophets as well. It was a way of showing that God had called those people to a sacred ministry. But God also has an appointed task for each of us. There is something God is calling each of us to do, something sacred, something precious, something unique to our particular circumstances. We are special. God uses us as God's appointed agents on this earth.

"My cup overflows." God's generosity is boundless. When you look back on the day that just ended, do you think about your problems, or your blessings? Some studies suggest that people who take note of the things they are grateful for in life experience more happiness than those who don't. Don't ignore the negatives – there might very well be some circumstances you could change, with some work and effort – but focus on the positives. Our cups routinely overflow. Blessings abound!

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." When the Lord is our Shepherd, when we earnestly strive to follow our Shepherd in our daily living, *good things* happen. God's *mercy* fills our lives. The Hebrew word is *hesed*. This special word is very difficult to translate; we don't have a word in English that is as incredibly rich as this word is. It's about God's *mercy*, God's *loving-kindness*, God's amazing *faithfulness* to us that manifests itself in so many different ways. Following our Savior results in a life filled with both the *bountiful goodness* of God, and also the *tender, loving mercy* of God. Really, when you get right down to it, what more could we possibly want?

Maybe just one more thing. "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." Literally, "for length of days." Some translations say "forever." We have a place in God's house *forever*. Remember what Jesus said: "In my father's house there are many rooms." There is a room, a place, a *special home*, for each one of us. We are precious in God's sight, in this life, and in the life to come.

One final thing - something I just learned this week. In the original Hebrew, this Psalm consists of a total of 57 words. Two of those are the header, "a psalm of David." Skip those, and we are left with 55 words. The middle three words are these: "for you are with me." There are 26 words in the first half of the psalm, then the words "for you are with me," then 26 words in the second half of the psalm. The words "for you are with me" are literally the centerpiece to the entire psalm. Also: there were no numbers in ancient Hebrew. They just had letters. Each letter also had a numerical value. The letter "aleph" had a numerical value of 1, the letter "bet" had a numerical value of 2, and so on. The letters for God's name – YHWH – have the numerical values of 10, 5, 6, and 5 – which adds up to 26. So that number 26 is *very* significant. You could say it's the most *divine* number of all. 26 words at the beginning, 26 words at the end, and in between, "for you are with me." Is that just a coincidence? Did the psalmist intentionally write the psalm this way? Or was God's hand at work in ways that the psalmist himself didn't even know? The whole point of the psalm is to say, "The Lord is with me!"

Which is, of course, exactly what one of the names of *Jesus* means. Emmanuel. *God is with us!*

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