

Psalm 23

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Preacher: Jon Hueni

[0:00] How many of you have memorized the 23rd Psalm? I won't call on you to recite it just yet. Alright. It's perhaps one of the first psalms that we've memorized.

! Walking with God by Richard Phillips.

And so we come to the 23rd Psalm. Why do you suppose it is that the 23rd Psalm is such a popular psalm? Anyone? Why is this psalm so popular, so well known?

Okay. It gets right into our lives and shows us where we live. Chuck?

It's comforting. It's a comforting psalm. Especially comforting as we deal with death.

[1:11] It's promised that God would be with us. Okay. It's comforting and especially in death. And we often hear it in the context of funerals.

And as we said, hospital visits to those who are dying. It breathes a peace and a calmness, doesn't it? That survives the very valley of the shadow of death.

And speaks peace in the face of the last enemy that we all must face. So if it's not a popular psalm, it ought to be. Because we all have that last enemy to face.

Would you recite it together with me? We're going to do it in the King James Version. Because it's the version that many of us memorize this psalm in. And if you've only been familiar with the NIV, you're forgiven this morning.

That's fine. But just indulge us one last time to quote again the 23rd psalm. And we'll do it in the King James Version. The Lord is my shepherd.

[2:16] I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.

He leadeth 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 thou art with me.

Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.

My cup, my head with oil, my cup runneth 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. Now this psalm, if you want to open to it, it's labeled a psalm of David.

[3:24] What's significant about that? That psalm 23 is a psalm of David. Anyone? He was a shepherd.

Exactly. And this is often called the shepherd's psalm. He spent many hours, day and night, with sheep. He was familiar with their ways.

And also familiar with the hardships and the task of what it means to care for sheep. The task of the shepherd. And so he is the most suitable, fitting author to be the one to pen these words by the Holy Spirit that compares the Lord to a shepherd and believers to sheep.

Now, we need to recognize then at the outset that this psalm, contrary to popular opinion, does not belong to everyone.

This psalm says things that are true only of the sheep of this shepherd. It's not true of everyone.

That when they come into the valley of the shadow of death, they have no reason to fear.

[4:33] That's only true of the one who knows Jehovah, God, as shepherd. So, we need to be sure of that.

The Lord is not the shepherd of everyone. John 10, 26 through 27. You do not believe me, Jesus said, because you are not my sheep.

My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. Those are the sheep of this shepherd. They know his voice.

They listen to it. They obey it. They follow it. He knows them. There's an intimate relationship here between the shepherd and the sheep. Indeed, the Lord, Yahweh, the name here, is the covenant name for the people of God.

This shepherd is one who has entered into a covenant with his people, a special people, to whom he says, I will be your God and you will be my people. I will be your shepherd.

[5:38] You will be my sheep. Not everyone is in that covenant. A covenant of grace through the blood of Jesus. So, we need to recognize from the outset that it's only those who have a personal relationship with God in Christ who have a right and who are herein described in this shepherd-sheep relationship.

Now, that the Lord would take the role of a shepherd is an amazing thing. In Israel and in other ancient societies, a shepherd was looked down upon as a lower class worker.

Can you think of any proof of that from the Scriptures? Where shepherds were viewed as despised people. Anything come to mind?

Carl? Carl? Any youngest sons here today?

No? Wow. Oh, there's a few. Did you ever get the most undesirable tasks around the house? Older brothers got a better choice of the things to do?

[6:58] And the most unpleasant task is left to the youngest. David. Yes, he's out tending the sheep. All right? Any other evidence from Scripture?

Shepherds were despised a lot. Dennis? Yes. Except I recall it seems like in the book of Exodus, that Pharaoh and all the Egyptians helped Jehovah to leave the church.

That's right. You remember when Jacob and his 12 sons and their families moved up to Egypt because there was food there and they were going to meet the Pharaoh, Joseph, who was second in line to the king, was introduced, was teaching his family what to say and the proper protocol in coming before Pharaoh.

And he says, when Pharaoh calls you in and asks what is your occupation, you should answer, your servants have tended livestock from our boyhood on just as our fathers did. Then you will be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians.

And Jacob, you know, you remember earlier, was arguing with his father-in-law Laban revealed what a difficult job it was to be a shepherd and why it would be a despised occupation.

[8:25] He said, the heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night and sleep fled from my eyes. How would you like that for job conditions? Heat in the daytime, cold at night, sleep deprivation.

Because a shepherd was with his sheep 24-7. He's out there with them continually. He's away from society, away from family, away from people much of the time, leading the sheep to new spots of green grass and to precious water, especially precious in Palestine, scarce.

So how amazing it is then to read that the Lord is my shepherd, that he would be the one to stoop, to perform this lowly task for me, to be a shepherd unto me.

Do you mean he would take on this humble role and serve me? The New Testament. It'll take the New Testament to unfold and unpack all that Jesus Christ would do in order to meet our needs and just how low he would stoop to be our shepherd and provide everything that we needed.

Well, if the Lord is my shepherd, then what am I? A sheep. Okay? Now that's not a real flattering thing to be compared to.

[9:57] How are we like sheep? Sorry? Dumb. We all like sheep have gone astray, Isaiah says.

Defenseless. You're reading my notes. Jim? We have an enemy to prowl for us. Okay, like sheep. Sheep have enemies. We too.

We're followers. We're followers. Sheep are not leading animals, but followers. Alright? Sheep are helpless and stupid animals, utterly dependent upon the shepherd for their welfare.

They're notorious for wandering off, as Isaiah says. wandering away from the safety of the flock, away from the chosen pastures of the shepherd and the streams of water, everything that's for their good, placing themselves into danger, and as our author says, into one irretrievable situation after another, where but for the shepherd they would perish.

Spurgeon ministered in a country where sheep and shepherds were plenteous. And he said, sheep have a great number of follies. If there's a hole in the hedge, they are sure to find it out and press through.

[11 : 24] They are prone to wonder and ready for all sorts of mischief. And in this respect, we are all just like silly sheep. We sing that song, don't we?

I was a wandering sheep. I once preferred to roam. The nature of roaming was in us. Someone said defenseless.

The sheep is defenseless. Other animals have defense mechanisms of various kinds. What's a bear got? I'm sorry?

Teeth, paws, brute strength. What's a lion got? Fangs? Speed? What's a deer got? Deer has speed, doesn't it?

It's a bird got. Wings to fly away. It's a porcupine got. Quills. What's a skunk got? You know what he's got.

[12 : 24] He's got a defense mechanism. What's a chameleon got? Camouflage. It's a bombardier beetle got. Powerful gases.

What's a sheep have? I didn't hear anything. I heard some muttering back there. Does a sheep have something to defend himself? I still didn't hear you.

A cushion. Would someone like to share with Deer how long a cushion would do with a wolf or a bear or a lion?

sheep. A sheep has absolutely nothing equal to the dangers that it's placed in. It's dependent upon someone outside of itself for protection.

Namely, the shepherd. And we too are helpless and in need of a good shepherd before enemies that are too strong for us. They need the shepherd as well to lead them to food and water, to bind up their wounds and so on, to direct them.

[13 : 34] So isn't it interesting that when the Lord was making animals, he made the sheep without defense mechanism. Made sheep in such a way as to demonstrate our need for the Lord as our shepherd.

So I say if it's humbling to acknowledge that we are sheep, it's altogether glorious to know that none other than the Lord is my shepherd. I don't know about you, but if I'm going to be a sheep, I could not ask for anything better than to have him as my shepherd.

Now in the rest of the psalm, David tells us why. Why we're blessed if the Lord is our shepherd. The whole psalm focuses on this great shepherd. References to him abound throughout.

He this, he that, he this, and then it changes to thou, a more personal address. Thou this, thou that. It's about him. But it's also about the sheep, about David.

He talks a lot about me and my. And he's sharing what is his experience because the Lord is his shepherd. Well, he summarizes the blessings of having the Lord as his shepherd in that first phrase that follows.

[14 : 49] I, shall not want. That's the summary statement. If the Lord is my shepherd, then I shall not want. I shall not be in want.

He's such a provider that I'll never be in want of anything that I really need. Psalm 84, 11, no good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

The lions may grow weak and hungry, Psalm 34, 10. But those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. So because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

And the rest of the psalm unpacks that. What are we not lacking for? Well, he gets specific in what his shepherd does for him. Verse 2, he makes me to lie down in green pastures and leads me beside the still waters.

Now in Palestine, sheep were always on the move. The shepherd always had to move them from one place to another. Water is scarce. Green grass is scarce.

[15 : 54] So he's got to find those places to feed them. What a picture here of the rich provision of our God and of the rest of soul that we have in him to find sheep lying around in deep, dark, tall, green grass chewing, and alongside the gently flowing stream, still water from which to drink without being fearful.

Our souls, too, need to be continually fed, and this is seen, too, by our shepherd. He leads us in the green grass and by the still waters of his word.

Here we find nourishment for our souls, and we're strengthened, and here we find rest. Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest, rest of soul.

We find it in our shepherd as he feeds us on his word, and in the scriptures we feed by faith on Christ who is the bread of life, who is the living water. Philip says, with the peace he gives, God is

able to make his sheep lie down comfortably in any circumstance under his loving care, any pasture can be made green and lush for the soul.

Yes, he leads me in green pastures. And then he says he restores my soul. When weak, when faint, when worn out, he revives my soul.

[17 : 28] He strengthens us, renews our strengths, so that we find our strength in the Lord, and keep persevering. not just when we're weak and faint, but also when we wander off and we stray and we're fallen.

He seeks me out and restores my soul. He goes after his wandering sheep and he renews us, renews our repentance, rekindles our love for him and our zeal for holiness and his glory.

David says he restores my soul. When David fell into the sin with Bathsheba, his heart grew cold as ice, his grace shriveled like a withered plant in the drought of summer.

But remember the shepherd came after him. The shepherd came after him to restore his soul. And he came after him by way of Nathan the prophet who said thou art the man.

That was the shepherd, you see. restoring his sheep. The discipline was firm. The child from their union died. But Psalm 51 shows us how thoroughly God restored his soul.

[18 : 45] And we saw the same in Peter last year as we studied Peter and his wandering off and falling with his triple denial. The Lord sends repenting grace with a crowing rooster.

The shepherd comes after him and restores his soul. And hasn't he done the same with us? Can't we say of our shepherd? He restores my soul. Our spiritual chart in the Christian life is a jagged edge moving upwards.

We've not yet arrived and all of our falls and strains are proof of that. But why is it on the chart that after every fall there's an upturn?

after every time we wander we come back. It's because the Lord our shepherd seeks us out and gives us renewed love for him and renewed repentance so that we come back and we walk on and follow on another mile.

This is the Lord our shepherd. Philip Keller was a shepherd in East Africa for many years where much of the ancient practice of shepherding continues.

[19 : 58] And he wrote a book A Shepherd's Look at Psalm 23. I want to read a portion where Phillips quotes him in his book at this point of the shepherd restoring our soul.

Keller points out that a common problem known to shepherds is cast sheep or cast down sheep. A sheep will sometimes lie down and roll over shifting its center of gravity so that it turns all the way over on its back.

When that happens the animal panics and thrashes violently. Stomach gases build up and cut off circulation from the legs so that the sheep may die within a few hours.

It is only the shepherd who can restore the sheep turning it over and saving its life. How often we are just like that. Spiritually we are on our backs helpless as cast sheep but the Lord comes to us and he rights us and he restores our lives and returns us to the fold.

He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Keller goes on to point out that left of them shall sheep typically follow and someone mentioned that.

[21 : 21] They typically follow the other sheep in front of them. They're herd animals even though they may be leading them away from safety and green pastures into dangers and ruin pastures that would leave them impoverished they still follow blindly on.

I know I shared this recently but I think it fits here. World Magazine reported in July of 2005 of shepherds in a town in eastern Turkey who didn't know what to do when a large herd of sheep began to follow the one beast who rather than grazing leaped off a cliff to its demise and in all nearly fifteen hundred sheep took the plunge creating a woolly mound there's your cushion there creating a woolly mound in the ravine below but as the pile grew larger many sheep actually survived the cliff dive as the massive sheep below provided enough padding to absorb the shock so there is defense I back up on that there but four hundred and fifty of them died stupid sheep to follow another one off the cliff to their own death now I ask you could there be a better picture of fallen nature today what do you see around you look at our young people following each other off the cliff to their own demise their own destruction there's a way that seems right to a man and it ends in destruction and we follow one another off that cliff to our own destruction perhaps more than we realize we follow the ways of the world around us without our shepherd we would follow them to destruction but our shepherd leads his sheep on a different path isn't that good news we're

not just left to follow others around us in our own instincts we have a shepherd who leads us on a different path namely paths of righteousness the right paths isn't that a blessing to have a shepherd who you can trust to lead you in right paths not wrong ones paths that lead to life not death to blessing not to cursing all of his paths all of his commands are holy righteous and good it's the path we saw in the first psalm psalm one the righteous walk in that narrow path that leads to life so we hear one of the sheep praying to his shepherd in psalm 119 make me to go in the path of your commands for there

I find a light turn my heart toward your statutes not toward selfish game that's that's where life is oh shepherd make me to go there turn my heart there now why does the shepherd lead us in paths of righteousness what's the stated reason in the text for his name's sake what does that mean for his glory how how does the sheep walking in paths of righteousness contribute to the glory of the shepherd okay it reflects upon him what's the shepherd like is he not holy and righteous is his name not hallowed then he will have a sheep who are also righteous and walk in the paths of righteousness because it shows to his glory what kind of shepherd he is that he's able to make sheep who are prone to wonder to walk in righteous paths how does that happen not not by nature it happens by supernatural grace the shepherd has a magic touch that changes the sheep's heart from wanting to stray and wanting to go this way to wanting to go his way what a shepherd praise be to his name glory comes to him and we're put on notice aren't we that shame or honor comes to our shepherd based upon where we're walking in paths of righteousness for his name's sake if you see any sheep walking down a path of righteousness all the glory goes to the shepherd yes it is for his name's sake and then paths of righteousness will also lead us through dark dangerous valleys as well as through green pastures in other words if you are going through a valley a dark valley of trials don't think oh I'm off the path of righteousness some people think that way the health wealth and prosperity gospel if I'm not just bubbling over with prosperity and financial prosperity and health physical health and I must be out of

God's will no you notice the shepherd who leads us in paths of righteousness sometimes takes us right down through the darkest valleys of all and he's still with us we're still on that right path verse 4a yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me we see now the whole sound gets even more personal we're talking about he this he that he leads me he guides me he restores me now thou art with me thou prepares the table before me this is the personal intimacy between the sheep and the shepherd I will fear no evil sheep are easily frightened we talked about it when the sheep gets on its back it panics they're a panicky creature and in that respect is it not a good picture of us we're so prone to worry to fear and none greater than our fear of death but here in this song we listen to a sheep walking through the very valley of the shadow of death and he's not sick with worry but he's content and confidently saying I will fear no evil I will fear no evil what is this well the

Christian has no evil to fear in these dark valleys not even death itself notice the sheep pass through the valley the valley is not our final destination it leads on to better pastures notice as well the valley holds only the shadow of death death is but a shadow across the path of believers Matthew Henry says there is no substantial evil in it the shadow of a serpent will not sting nor the shadow of a sword kill even so the Savior has taken the sting out of death so that it's just a shadow to us by dying for our sins all that remains of death for the believer is a shadow that cannot really harm us but will only bring us into the presence the immediate presence of our shepherd so Christ's death is forever changed ours we need not fear it but the point that he makes here is the presence of Christ is the cause for no fear I will fear no evil for thou art with me over and over that's the promise when you pass through the waters I will be with you the almighty Lord covenanted to be my shepherd with me in trouble drawing near to me even in death think who's writing this now David ever go through these valleys he lived in these valleys for for 12 years he had Saul seeking his life he went to bed at night not knowing if he'd wake up with a spear through his neck and yet he's able to say I will lie down and sleep in peace I will fear no evil for thou art with me it was last week isn't it he who watches over us and protects us Psalm 121 never what never slumbers or sleeps he doesn't sleep through the night so David can because his shepherd stands watch doesn't just slumber off for a minute always vigilant the shepherd for the sheep that the sheep might rest content

[30 : 25] Derek Kidner says only the Lord can lead a man through death all other guides must turn back and the traveler is left to go on alone but our Savior is with us and leads us through death into everlasting life notice he also finds comfort in his rod and staff thy rod and thy staff they comfort me

the rod some have said was sort of a stick with a big ball on the end worn on the belt it was a weapon with which to drive off the wolves smash the heads of snakes and even to wield to get the attention of unruly sheep and then the staff that long staff the shepherd has a staff we sing that song has children that's to keep order in the flock and when one is straying off that hooks there to to hook them by the neck and to bring them back in line with the flock and David says thy rod and thy staff they scare me they comfort me why would a sheep find comfort in the rod and staff of the shepherd why would a

Christian why would you find comfort in the rod and staff of your Savior security is that not true in our children as much as they would like to rebel against the boundary lines growing up in a family where the boundary lines are clearly defined grants a security to our children do you not find it a comfort to know that if you would walk away from Christ and turn your back on him and start wondering off being drawn in by some temptation that he's going to come after you isn't that comforting there's going to be a staff to come out and reach out and grab hold of you and pull you back it's a comfort to my soul so it's put as another reason to rejoice in the shepherd that I shall not want even when I stray I have one whose discipline is a comfort to me and he protects me from my enemies but he's not only with us in our dangers just with us he also richly provides for us in the presence of our enemies verse five now prepares to table before me in the presence of mine enemies now anointest my head with oil my cup runneth over this is not a picture of meager rations that a soldier has to do with when he's out in the battle and the enemies are all around him no this is a feast that spread right in the presence of the enemies what a picture of God's provision for his sheep even though we're surrounded by enemies he is able to get the goods to us he's able to spread the table to anoint us with oil and to cause our cup to run over it's all about abundance and feast healing in the oil refreshment from the the weary dry climate of Palestine there's the shepherd and the little sheep sticking his nose up to have the oil rubbed in the oil of healing it's a refreshing healing ointment this is our our shepherd supplying supplying right in the midst of our danger it's David often running from King Saul as we said and yet right in the midst enjoying a feast a fellowship with his savior such that he would draw comfort and joy in the midst of it and then notice the note of confidence in the first word of verse six surely it's like like he stands back and says boy having thought about my shepherd there there's I'm really sure of this much surely with the Lord is my shepherd two things are sure surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and secondly I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever Spurgeon says our shepherd has two sheep dogs one's called goodness and the other's called mercy and they track us down every day we've seen shepherds and in Scotland and their sheep dogs trained to herd up the sheep instead of having to traverse the the hillsides themselves they just send the dogs out and the dogs just round them up and track them down and bring them all through through the gate into the into the sheep fold and so

God has his goodness and mercy tracking us down pursuing us every day of our lives our good days our bad days our days when we have our devotions our days when we don't have our devotions there are his sheep dogs goodness and mercy and they come after us and they track us they find us and they bless us and they spread a table before us they fill our cup to overflowing never a day without the goodness of the Lord never a day without the mercies of our God surely goodness and mercy all the days of my life are you sure that can be if you're a sheep under the shepherd you can wake up every day and say I am expecting to be met by goodness and mercy today because the Lord is my shepherd surely goodness and mercy will find me today and then he's equally certain that this experience that is much like a sheep going all over the place throughout its life finding food and water and all the rest that that the journey ends the sheep comes home at last and he's sure of this that after all the days of my life here I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever my shepherd in time my shepherd in eternity in this life and the next and to be with the Lord to dwell in his house not as a visitor but as one of his covenant people this is what's ahead of us so follow on what an encouraging song blessed sheep to be in Jesus fold can you say the Lord is my shepherd this morning oh you're a blessed man or woman if you can not all sheep have such a blessed shepherd some have hirelings some are sheep without shepherds oh to have Jesus as our shepherd

Jesus says in John 10 and verse 11 I am the good shepherd and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep and it's here where we see just how self-denying and how humble and how low this good shepherd will stoop if I as his sheep am in need my greatest need is a substitute to die in

my place to suffer the wrath of God my shepherd will do it I shall not want want and is that not what he did for us lay down his life for us the sheep have you ever thought about that scenario where David's the shepherd there he is and he's looking over his father's sheep and along comes a bear and hauls off with one of his sheep and David goes after him and grabs him and strikes him and kills him he risked his own life have you ever thought how foolish that was from one perspective David was worth ten thousand sheep to his father you're a parent you're a parent you're a parent you're a parent you're a parent you got a son out watching your sheep and one's all do you want him going after the lion the bear to recover one sheep you say no my son is worth more than ten thousand herds then why did he do it well he did it because he was to be a type of the Lord Jesus Christ that's the only thing that makes sense of this this act of David that that Jesus when one of his own that the father gave him from eternity is in danger of perishing he will go into the jaws of death to rescue him he will be damned in his place he will die that his sheep might have life he the son who is worth ten thousand worlds to the father will nevertheless lay down his life that we might live blessed shepherd blessed shepherd blessed sheep to have this Jesus as our shepherd let's take our song sheets I trust you were given one if you need one hold your hand up we'll get you one and let's sing this rendition of the 23rd psalm as we conclude and just revel in what is yours as a sheep in Christ's fold revel in your shepherd thank him that this is true of you and if it's not come to this shepherd today you you