



Psalm 23 - The Divine Shepherd

A Psalm of David.

Introduction

This hymn is usually classified as a psalm of confidence in the Lord's care. It uses two images: the Lord as shepherd who cares for the sheep (vv.1-4), and the Lord as host who cares for his guest (vv.5-6).

These images would be familiar from everyday experience, including David's own as a shepherd boy: <<*But David said to Saul, 'Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it*>> (1 Samuel 17:34-35); but they also evoke other ideas common in the ancient Near East, including the OT, with the deity as shepherd of his people and the deity as host of the meal.

In worship, the faithful celebrate God's greatness and majesty; and when they sing this psalm, they see his majesty in the way he personally attends to each of his covenant lambs. He is the shepherd for Israel as a whole; and in being such, he is the shepherd for each faithful Israelite as well.

Psalm 23:1-4 - The Lord as Shepherd

Just as a shepherd cares for his sheep, so the Lord cares for his people, providing for their needs, guiding them, and protecting them.

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Psalm 23:1

The Lord is my shepherd. The God as shepherd motif is common in the Bible. David thought about God, the God of Israel; as he thought about his relationship

with God, he made the analogy of a shepherd and his sheep. God was like a shepherd to David, and David was like a sheep to God. David knew this in a personal sense. He could say my shepherd. It was not just that the Lord was a shepherd for others in a theoretical sense; he was a real, personal shepherd for David himself. The Lord is the shepherd of the people as a whole, as well as individual members; and in this psalm the particular member is in view.

It is also a familiar idea throughout the Bible, that the Lord is a shepherd to his people. The idea begins as early as the Book of Genesis, where Moses called the Lord <<*the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel*>> (Genesis 49:24b).

- In Psalm 28:9 David invited the Lord to shepherd the people of Israel, and to bear them up forever. Psalm 80:1 also looks to the Lord as the shepherd of Israel, who would lead Joseph like a flock.
- Ecclesiastes 12:11 speaks of the words of the wise, which are like well-driven nails, given by one shepherd.
- Isaiah 40:11 reveals that the Lord will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs with his arm. Micah 7:14 invites the Lord to shepherd your people with your staff, as in days of old.
- Zechariah 13:7 speaks of the Messiah as the shepherd who will be struck, and the sheep scattered, a verse quoted in Matthew 26:31.
- In John 10:11 and 10:14 Jesus clearly spoke of himself as the good shepherd, who gives his life for the sheep and who can say <<*I know my own, and my own know me*>>. Hebrews 13:20 speaks of Jesus as that great shepherd of the sheep, and 1 Peter 2:25 calls Jesus the shepherd and overseer of souls, and calls Jesus the chief shepherd (1 Peter 5:4).

The idea of Jesus as the good shepherd was precious to early Christians. One of the more common motifs in catacomb paintings is Jesus as a shepherd, with a lamb carried across his shoulders.

Overwhelmingly, the idea behind God's role as shepherd is a loving care and concern. David found comfort and security in the thought that God cared for him like a shepherd cares for his sheep. David felt that he needed a shepherd. The heart of this Psalm does not connect with the self-sufficient. But those who acutely sense their need, the poor in spirit Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:2), find great comfort in the idea that God can be a shepherd to them in a personal sense.

I shall not want. There will be no lack of what one needs. For David, the fact of God's shepherd-like care was the end of dissatisfied need. He said I shall not want both as a declaration and as a decision, for it means:

- All my needs are supplied by the Lord, my shepherd.

- I decide to not desire more than what the Lord, my shepherd gives: <<**My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness**>> (2 Corinthians 12:9a).

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;

3 he restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths
 for his name's sake.

Psalm 23:2-3

He makes me lie down. The Lord as a shepherd knew how to make David rest when he needed it, just as a literal shepherd would care for his sheep. The implication is that the sheep does not always know what it needs and what is best for itself, and so needs help and guidance from the shepherd.

The shepherd also knew the good places to make his sheep rest. Green pastures and still waters are peaceful places for rest and feeding. The images are rich with the sense of comfort, care and rest.

He restores my soul. The tender care of the shepherd described in the previous verse had its intended effect. David's soul was restored by the figurative green pastures and still waters the shepherd brought him to. The restoration, refreshment, or revival of the soul or life, indicates the returning of life or vitality: <<**He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him**>> (Ruth 4:15), <<**The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple**>> (Psalm 19:7), <<**Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest are faithful messengers to those who send them; they refresh the spirit of their masters**>> (Proverbs 25:13), and: <<**I called to my lovers but they deceived me; my priests and elders perished in the city while seeking food to revive their strength**>> (Lamentations 1:19).

He leads me in right paths. The shepherd was a guide. The sheep did not need to know where the green pastures or still waters were; all he needed to know was where the shepherd was. The shepherd would guide the sheep to what he needed. The paths in which God leads his faithful are the basic moral direction of their lives, toward righteousness, seen here as a blessing, not a burden.

For his name's sake. The shepherd guides the sheep with an overarching view to the credit and glory of the shepherd's own name. That is, in order to preserve his

reputation for being true to his revealed character: <<*Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name*>> (1 Kings 8:41), <<*For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great*>> (Psalm 25:11) and: <<*You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me*>> (Psalm 31:3).

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff —
they comfort me.

Psalm 23:4

The darkest valley, more commonly translated as the shadow of death, may be the shadow that death casts, or it may be deep emotional darkness: <<*Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds settle upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it*>> (Job 3:5), compared with: <<*he brought them out of darkness and gloom, and broke their bonds asunder*>> (Psalm 107:14). Perhaps the idea is that in a valley in the desert or wadi in Judah one can encounter deep shadows, and cannot know for sure who, e.g. bandits; or what, e.g. animals, flash floods, etc, lurks in them; even in such periods of suspense and danger, the faithful find assurance that God is with them, and thus they need not fear.

Spurgeon wrote: 'Death in its substance has been removed, and only the shadow of it remains. Some one has said that when there is a shadow there must be light somewhere, and so there is. Death stands by the side of the highway in which we have to travel, and the light of heaven shining upon him throws a shadow across our path; let us then rejoice that there is a light beyond. Nobody is afraid of a shadow, for a shadow cannot stop a man's pathway even for a moment. The shadow of a dog cannot bite; the shadow of a sword cannot kill; the shadow of death cannot destroy us'.

For you are with me. This emphasises that it is the presence of the shepherd that eliminated the fear of evil for his sheep: <<*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you*>> (Isaiah 43:2). No matter his present environment, David could look to the fact of God's shepherd-like presence and know you are with me and I fear no evil.

Your rod and your staff – they comfort me. The rod and the staff were instruments used by a shepherd. The idea is of a sturdy walking stick, used to as gently as possible guide the sheep and to protect it from potential predators.

There is some debate among commentators as to if David had the idea of two separate instruments, the rod and the staff, or one instrument used in two ways. The Hebrew word for rod, *shaybet*, here seems to simply mean ‘a stick’ with a variety of applications. The Hebrew word for staff, *mishaynaw*, seems to speak of ‘a support’ in the sense of a walking stick.

Psalm 23:5-6 - The Lord as Host

Some have argued that the image of shepherd and sheep is still present here; but the mention of a table, of putting oil on the head, the cup, and the house of the Lord, all show that the psalm now describes the faithful person as God’s guest at a meal, i.e. <<*You prepare a table before me*>>. The enemies are powerless to prevent the enjoyment of God’s generous hospitality; perhaps they are there as captives at a victory celebration. Goodness, mercy and steadfast love are the assurance for the faithful that God has showered his grace upon them. For a non-Levite to dwell in the house of the Lord is to have ready access to the sanctuary for worship: <<*One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple*>> (Psalm 27:4). ‘My whole life long’ is literally, ‘for length of days’; this may simply be another way of saying ‘all the days of my life’, but is more likely to be meant as ‘for days without end.’

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Psalm 23:5

You prepare a table before me. Without departing from the previous picture of the valley of the shadow of death, David envisioned the provision and goodness given by the Lord as a host, inviting David to a rich table prepared for him. David gives a beautiful picture: table suggests bounty; prepare suggests foresight and care; before me suggests the personal connection.

In the presence of my enemies. This is a striking phrase. The goodness and care suggested by the prepared table is set right in the midst of the presence of my enemies. The host’s care and concern does not eliminate the presence of the enemies, but enables the experience of God’s goodness and bounty even in their midst.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Despite the dangers about and the presence of his enemies, David enjoyed the richness of his host's goodness. He was refreshed by a head anointed with oil: <<*Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions*>> (Psalm 45:7b); his cup was over-filled.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Psalm 23:6

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. The host's care brought the goodness and mercy of God to David, and he lived in the faithful expectation of it continuing all the days of his life.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. The Psalm ends with the calmest assurance that he would enjoy the presence of the Lord forever: <<*For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness*>> (Psalm 84:10), and: <<*There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day*>> (Luke 2:36-37); this applies both in his days on this earth and beyond.