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Psalm 23  
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### He Leads Me

Today we turn our hearts once again to one of the most cherished passages in all of Scripture: Psalm 23. I preached on this a few weeks back when I taught on praying through the Psalms. So clearly, through Dorothy's request, we aren't done with it yet. Or rather it is not done with us yet.

These ancient words, penned by King David, have comforted countless souls through the centuries. But as Christians, we read this Psalm through the lens of the New Testament, seeing its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd. So this morning, I'd to walk through the psalm together and see how Jesus leads, provides, protects, and loves us with a shepherd's heart.

Let's begin by standing and reading Psalm 23 together.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,

3 he restores my soul.

He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake.

4 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.

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

6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord  
forever.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

David begins with a declaration: “The Lord is MY shepherd.” In the ancient world, shepherds were humble laborers, often the youngest or least in the family. Their work was arduous and unending, requiring vigilance, strength, and deep compassion for their flock. David, once a shepherd himself, knew firsthand the devotion that the job required.

But when David calls God his shepherd, he’s not speaking of a distant deity or idol. He’s proclaiming a personal relationship: “MY shepherd.” This is not just the God of Israel, but the God who knows, leads, and cares for him individually.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus claims this title for Himself: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, the hired hand abandons the sheep and runs away...For he cares nothing for the sheep.”<sup>1</sup> (John 10:11). Jesus is not a hired hand; He is the shepherd who owns the flock, loves each sheep, and is willing to sacrifice everything for their safety.

Because Jesus is our shepherd, we “shall not want.” The Hebrew word used for want is *eshar*. It means to without, to lack, or be in need. With Jesus by our side in life, He is the source of all we truly need—spiritually, emotionally, and physically. In Him, we lack nothing essential for life and godliness.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.” (Psalm 23:2-3)

Phillip Keller in his book, *A Shepherd’s Look at Psalm 23*, explains some of the characteristics of sheep that he learned as a shepherd. Keller claims that sheep are anxious, easily frightened and unable to rest unless they feel completely safe. For a sheep to lie down they must be unafraid of predators, not pestered by flies, ticks, or diseases, and they must be well fed. Until they are, they will constantly fidget and fuss, lacking peace. Only a good shepherd can create the conditions for them to lie down in peace, have good food to feed off of, and know where the good sources of water are to drink from. In the same way, Jesus, our Good Shepherd, brings us to green pastures—places of nourishment and rest, where we feast on his words and are led beside still waters, where our souls are refreshed.

The “still waters” that the psalmist mentions are not stagnant, but gently flowing—safe for sheep to drink without fear. Ancient shepherds would often carve channels to calm the rushing streams, ensuring the flock could drink safely. Whenever I go backpacking in the wilderness, it is important to know how and where to find safe sources of water to drink from. You always want flowing water, not stagnant. There is less chance of it being contaminated with some sort of disease. Even still, it is important to use a water purifier to get rid of microscopic organisms called giardia which you cannot see but can still make you really sick.

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<sup>1</sup> John 10:11-12, 13b

Jesus does the same for us, calming the storms of our lives and providing for us in ways we often do not see.

“He restores my soul.” Some translations use “refreshes.” But I prefer restores. The Hebrew root word used is shub. It means to return, restore, or repent. In other words, turning us away from the direction where we were headed. The word for soul is nephesh. It can mean heart, person, self. It’s what makes each person unique. Our personhood, if you will. Each person’s nephesh is a reflection of God’s nephesh.

Sometimes life’s journey leaves us wounded, weary, or lost. Whether through our choices or others, our nephesh can become marred and distorted, no longer reflecting the image of the God in which we’ve been created. The Prophet Isaiah exclaims, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, marred that image, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him, our Good Shepherd, the iniquity of us all.”<sup>2</sup>

Thanks be to God, that Jesus specializes in restoration—He heals our brokenness, forgives our sins, and renews our spirits. AND He the Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one lost sheep, even rejoicing when He brings it home.

Keller talks about lost sheep which become cast. Daily, he would take inventory of his sheep and notice when one did not show up with the others. So he would go out looking for them. When a sheep becomes cast, this means to fall over, usually on their backs, and unable to get back up themselves. Maybe their fleece was too thick, or wet, or caked with mud. They might also have been too fat or out of shape. Sometimes, Keller would have to literally shear the sheep in the field to immediately get rid of their heavy fleece so that they could stand up and rejoin the other sheep.

“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” (Psalm 23:3)

A shepherd’s job is not just to feed and protect, but to guide. Sheep are notorious for wandering; without guidance, they quickly lose their way and fall into danger.

Isn’t that so like us? When we think we can do it on our own or be guided by the world’s way. We get lose our way, get lost, and lose hope that we’ll make it back home.

I once took a group of high school boys hiking in the Indian Heaven Wilderness near Mt. Adams. And as boys do, they took off ahead of me and missed a crucial turn in the trail that would lead us to our first night’s campsite. You see I had the trail map, they did not. I knew where we were going. They had no clue. When the trail that they followed finally deadened, they acknowledge

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 53:6

they had gotten lost and needed help to find the path. Eventually, we got back on track and made it to our campsite.

Our Good Shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness—the right paths that will bring us to our final campsite where there is life, peace, and honor to His name. But we need to trust him and be patient that he'll show us the way.

Jesus does not simply point the way; He walks with us. He is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). He leads us by His Word and Spirit, shaping our character and guiding our decisions so that our lives reflect His glory. For his name's sake. Which as Christians, we carry his name's sake into the world around us.

“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.” (Psalm 23:4)

The journey of faith is not always through sunlit meadows. There are valleys—dark, dangerous, and uncertain. The “valley of the shadow of death” was a real place, a treacherous ravine between Jerusalem and Jericho, haunted by thieves and wild animals. Think of the road in Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan where the man was robbed and left for dead. Yet, David declares, “I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

I always read this psalm at the bedside of someone who is dying. It reminds us that Jesus does not abandon us in our darkest hours. He walks with us. His rod was used for defense against enemies. His staff was used for guidance and support. It gently pulls us back when we stray.

In the New Testament, Jesus promises, “I am with you always, to the end of the age”<sup>3</sup>. No valley is too deep, no shadow too dark, for the light of His presence.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” (Psalm 23:5)

Notice how the imagery shifts from shepherd to host. The Shepherd becomes the One who prepares a feast for us—even when enemies surround us. In ancient times, to eat at someone's table was to be under their protection and favor.

Keller mentioned that a table in the shepherding world was actually summer pastureland often at higher elevations that were only reachable after the winter snows had melted. These “tables” or mesas would have rich grass to feed upon, but could also have noxious weeds that could make the sheep sick or even die. They might also have water sources that need to be opened up, cleared out, or prepared for the sheep to drink from.

In the same way, Jesus has gone ahead of us in every situation in life and has prepared the table for us...where we can experience life and life to the full.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28:20

But the summer table lands also provide it's enemies with flies and certain diseases. Sheep are especially bothered by Nose flies who lay eggs on the warm mucus areas of the nose. As the eggs hatch, larvae crawl up in the sheep's nose and lodge themselves in the head cavity. Sheep can literally go mad from the discomfort and knocking their heads around to ease the pain.

Another enemy is a skin disease call scab. This highly infectious blight is passed from sheep to sheep by rubbing their heads agains one another, a common habit of endearment. But it too can drive the sheep mad from discomfort.

So to protect against both of these enemies of the summer table, a shepherd must anoint the nose and head area with a mixture of linseed oil, sulfur, and spices. In biblical days, it was olive oil. For scab, the entire sheep would be baptized by the healing oil.

"Anointing my head with oil" was also a sign of blessing, healing, and honor. God marks us as His own, chosen and beloved. The Apostle Paul said that Jesus even implants his Holy Spirit within us that works to bring us to maturity and likeness of Jesus himself.

"My cup overflows." In Christ, we receive not only enough, but abundance—grace upon grace, blessing upon blessing. Even in adversity, we experience the overflowing goodness of God.

I recently learned about an event that two women of Cascades' women recently hosted that is a beautiful image of what the psalmist is painting here.

Erin Suttin and Rebecca Foster have been in the event creation business for several years. Their work is to imagine the wedding, party, or event of your dreams. One of the ways that their business has morphed over the past several years is to create a space where other event coordinators, caterers, photographers, or whatever could network and develop community...not as competitors (or enemies) but as friends and colleagues.

They call it the Kindred Collective.

At these events, people who are often the hosts or hostesses, become guests, and for once are able to enjoy the event as participants, instead of fretting over it.

Check this latest event they created in a cave...yes I said a cave...outside of Bend, Oregon.

(Show the video.)

Isn't that amazing? Preparing a table in the presence of our enemies. They are so talented. They are creating the kingdom of God without people knowing it.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Psalm 23:6)

David concludes with confidence: goodness and mercy will pursue him—not just occasionally, but "all the days of my life". God's love is relentless, His mercy unending. The word "follow" here is actually stronger; it means to "pursue." God's

goodness and mercy chase after us, stalk us, even when we wander. Just like in the song we sang earlier. “There’s no shadow You won’t light up, Mountain you won’t climb up, Coming after me. There’s no wall You won’t kick down, Lie You won’t tear down, Coming after me.”

And the journey does not end in the valley or even at the table. It continues into eternity: “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” The Good Shepherd leads us home—to His presence, His family, His everlasting kingdom.

So may we see that Psalm 23 is not just ancient poetry; it is a prophetic portrait of Jesus himself. May we believe that He is the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep by name, who lays down His life for the flock, who leads, feeds, protects, and restores.

And when we trust Jesus as our Good Shepherd:

- We find rest for our souls.
- We receive guidance for our journey.
- We are protected in every trial.
- We experience abundance even in adversity.
- We are pursued by God’s goodness and mercy.
- We have the promise of eternal life with Him.

My friends, are you weary? Do you feel like you’ve been wandering for a while? Are you walking through a dark valley? Hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling your name. Trust Him to lead you, guide you, provide for you, protect you, and bring you safely home.

“The Lord is MY shepherd, I shall not want.”

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, our Good Shepherd, thank You for Your faithful love. Lead us beside still waters, restore our souls, and guide us in Your paths. Even in the darkest valleys, help us to trust Your presence. May Your goodness and mercy pursue us all our days, until we dwell with You forever. Amen.