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THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

Psalm 23

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For generations the 23rd Psalm has been the dog-eared and dirty-edged page in the family Bible and the prayer book. It is this passage that is most likely to be read aloud at any special occasion, especially funerals. No other chapter of the Bible has been committed to memory as often as this one. Yet just because Psalm 23 is familiar does not mean that it's been well explored. The White House is familiar, and I have toured it several times, but if I tried to explore it, then the guards might shoot me. Psalm 23, on the other hand, requires no special clearance. So let's explore it and discover what God is saying to us in this familiar yet still often unknown chapter of the Bible.

OVERVIEW OF PSALM 23

The superscription reads, "A Psalm of David," referring to Israel's second king, who lived around 1000 BC. However, there's no indication of the circumstances in which the psalm was written. Was it during David's early years as a shepherd? Or was it later, after David had become king? What was happening in David's life when he wrote Psalm 23?

In the first half of this psalm (vv 1-3), it seems like David wrote it during his youth, out of his experience of God's *provision* for him and his flock in the Judean wilderness. The hills there are desolate, particularly in late summer, when there's nothing green that hasn't been eaten, and all the springs have run dry. Every year around this time David would have been saying his prayers as he searched for green pastures and still waters. As God provided for them year after year, I can imagine young David singing, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall want for nothing."

There's more to Psalm 23 than God's *provision*, however. In the second half (vv 4-6), David's experience of God is more personal and intimate, as he describes God's *presence* during hardship, even preparing a banquet for him while holding his enemies at bay. By the end of the psalm, David's entire perspective has changed, as he realizes God's unwavering pursuit of him.

It feels as if the second half of Psalm 23 comes from the lips of an old man, whose intimate experience of God has deeply transformed him. Maybe he wrote the first half in his youth, and then came back and added the second half in his final years, seeing that indeed God's goodness and mercy had followed him all his days.

In any case, this framework provides a roadmap for our journey through Psalm 23. Here's the plan that we will follow:

- The Lord's *Provision* (Ps 23:1-3). e.g. "I shall not want" for anything.
- The Lord's *Presence*. (Ps 23:4-6). e.g. "You are with me." "You prepare a table for me." "I'll dwell in your house forever."

Finally, after we've walked through Psalm 23, we'll zoom out and consider what it means for Christians as we think about the Lord's *Promise* for us today.

THE LORD'S PROVISION (Psalm 23:1-3)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. Psalm 23:1.

What's new here? That God is a *shepherd*? It certainly is a lovely way to think about God, particularly if you've always thought of him as your adversary. The idea of God-as-shepherd can be revolutionary for someone new to faith. Instead of fearing God and running away from him, coming to the Lord-as-shepherd feels safe, because shepherds provide and protect and guide. That's the God we need, and is in fact the God of the Bible. He would love for you to think about him this way.

While the idea of God-as-shepherd may be new to us, it wasn't new to David or Israel. Everyone in the cradle of civilization thought this way. The tradition of god-as-shepherd dates back to the earliest written records of human history. The Sumerians thought of their god as a shepherd. Then the Akkadians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians. By the time of David and the Kingdom of Israel, the surrounding nations and their religions had been saying that their gods were their shepherds for at least 2,000 years.

What's new in Ps 23 isn't the idea of God-as-shepherd. Rather, it's the particular God David claims as his shepherd. Look closely at 23:1 and notice that the word "LORD" in "The LORD is my shepherd" is rendered in all caps. Since 1611 with the King James Bible translation (and even a century earlier in the translation work of Tyndale and Coverdale), the Hebrew name of God in the English Old Testament has been identified in all caps and translated LORD or GOD. The Hebrew name of God is "Yahweh" (sometimes vocalized as "Jehovah").¹ "Yahweh" occurs 7000 times in the Old Testament and twice in Psalm 23.²

¹ Every god in the ancient world had a name. Egypt worshiped Ra. Philistia worshiped Dagon. Moab worshiped Chemosh. Israel worshiped Yahweh.

² When you see LORD in all caps in an English Bible, you'll know that the Hebrew says Yahweh. English Bibles substitute LORD for "Yahweh" out of reverence for God. Just as it wouldn't be appropriate to address a head of state by first name, Jews and early Christians developed the practice of substituting a title like "Lord" for God's name.

Thus, what David is saying in Psalm 23:1 is this: "I'm choosing Yahweh, and not the gods of the Canaanites or Philistines. *Yahweh* is my shepherd, and because *he* is my shepherd, I shall want for nothing. Other gods are fickle, weak and ineffective. But my Lord provides."

In verse 2 David begins to describe the Lord's provision in further detail, starting with God's provision for his material needs. Notice the two places and the two postures David describes:

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. Ps 23:2.

The two places in this verse are *green pastures* and *still waters*. There are still a lot of sheep in the Holy Land. Up in Samaria, down around Bethlehem and in the Judean Hills, and throughout the land of Jordan. If you visit, you'll see sheep everywhere—and green pastures nowhere. It's such a dry place, especially in the summertime when there may be six months without rain.

Still waters (or a better translation might be "quiet waters") are also hard to find there, particularly in summer. Sometimes dangerous flash floods come rushing through the valleys after a rain storm, but there aren't a lot of quiet waters where cattle can be refreshed in safety.

Therefore, from David's perspective, green pastures and quiet waters were very special. These two places represent visions of luxury, of an oasis in what was otherwise often brown rocks and dirt. David says that these are the places Yahweh has provided for him.

The two postures David describes are *lying down* in green pastures, and *being led* beside quiet waters. Sheep are said to be anxious creatures. Unlike dogs and cats, sheep don't lie down easily. They must be certain of their security, and their bellies must be full. So for sheep to lie down in a grassy field, they would have already had a very, very good day.

Being led, on the other hand, comes naturally to sheep. They always follow the leader, whether a shepherd or another sheep. If the sheep in front goes off the cliff, so will the others that follow. If the sheep in front is slaughtered, the others will wait in line for their turn. In this case, however, Yahweh doesn't lead David to slaughter, but to safety and provision.

Thus, in both places and both postures, David shows how his shepherd-God, Yahweh, cares for his material needs. Because Yahweh is his shepherd, David enjoys plenty of food and drink, and he also can rest securely.

In v 3, David echoes the same two postures of v 2, namely *lying down* and *being led*. In this case he moves on to describe the *spiritual* benefits of the Lord's provision:

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Ps 23:3.

Not only does the Lord provide places where David can lie down and rest physically, God also renews David spiritually by restoring his soul. Furthermore, not only does the Lord David's

shepherd lead him to places where he can eat and drink his fill, he also leads him in paths of righteousness, so that David's heart and mind can be nourished as well.

Take note of the reason why the Lord leads David in paths of righteousness: it's for "his name's sake." Everybody knows that David has chosen Yahweh to be his shepherd-God; therefore Yahweh's reputation is on the line. The fact that David lacks nothing, both materially and spiritually, presents a compelling case for following Yahweh instead of other gods.

Psalms 23:1-3 is a tidy, efficient, and convincing argument for God's good care for his people. Had I been writing this song, verse 3 would have been a satisfying place to end it. After all, what more does one need besides God's good provision? The answer to that question is what the second half of the psalm is all about.

THE LORD'S PRESENCE (Ps 23:4-6)

The Great Depression profoundly impacted those who lived through it. Many remembered it as a time of deprivation and desperation in the extreme. The generation that emerged was absolutely determined that their children would want for nothing. So the Baby Boomers grew up knowing material prosperity, as their parents—especially their fathers—worked tirelessly to provide for all their needs. Yet many Boomers passed into adulthood feeling that in spite of all that they had been given, they still longed for something else: they wanted mom's and dad's presence and affection as well as their provision.

What more do we need besides God's provision? For David, God's presence was even more important:

*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. Ps 23:4.*

In v 4 David shifts from singing *about* Yahweh to singing *to* him. David sings, "You are with me." No matter how much God provides for us, there's something life-changing when we experience his presence.

"You are with me" is literally the center of David's song. There are 55 Hebrew words in the twenty-third psalm. The middle three words are the words we translate, "You are with me." On either side are 26 words each, like this:

26 words + "You are with me" + 26 words

Twenty-six is a special number in the Psalms, because it's the sum of the Hebrew letters that spell *Yahweh*, the name of the Lord. Substituting God's name (Yahweh = 26) for the first and last 26 words in the Psalm results in a striking summary of Psalm 23:

Yahweh. You are with me. Yahweh.

This simple summary highlights the essential message of Psalm 23.

How does David know that the Lord is with him? The circumstances he describes in verse 4 are not happy times but dark days. He experiences God's presence while walking through the valley of the shadow of death, or perhaps a better translation, as the ESV footnote suggests, is "the valley of deep darkness."

On the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho, there is an unforgettable steep and narrow canyon called the Wadi Qelt where in one place it is said that the sun never shines. It is called the "Valley of the Shadows," and some people think it's what David describes in Ps 23:4. Some also believe that Jesus had this same place in mind when he described, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the place where a man was robbed and beaten and left for dead.

Even if you've never been to that valley, we've all been there. We've all had the experience of feeling isolated, vulnerable, and afraid. In fact, even when the sun is shining, the birds are singing, and there are people all around, we can still experience this valley of deep darkness. In Palestine they call it Wadi Qelt; in America we might call it high school, or infertility, or unemployment, or any number of other dark and lonely circumstances. Yet just as "in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells, and the deeper the wells, the brighter [the] stars shine,"³ so it is that when we're alone in the Valley of the Shadows we're most sensitive to the presence of the Lord. He's always with us, always providing, always guiding, and yet it's in the valley of the shadow, surrounded by bones, that the living God shines the brightest.

There, in that valley, David says that he will fear no evil, no calamity. Why? Because in the presence of the Lord, both his rod and his staff are of comfort. The rod is the shepherd's club, wielded against predators. The staff is the shepherd's walking stick and also used to nudge sheep back into line. These are different tools, and we can rest assured that the Lord knows which one to use on wolves and which one to use on sheep. He will not club his sheep to death; he will continually correct them with his staff. Even though none of us loves being corrected, we mustn't be ashamed when it happens. God's correction is evidence that he is with us and he loves us, both gifts that make the experience worthwhile.

In verse 5, David shifts metaphors, moving from farm to table, i.e. from the Lord as shepherd to the Lord as host:

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Ps 23:5.*

³ Arthur Bennet, *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers*. Banner of Truth, 1975.

Verse 5 brings together David's themes of God's provision and God's presence into a vivid portrait. Look what's awaiting you at the other end of the Valley of Shadows. It's a king's banquet in your honor, thrown by the greatest host ever known. He knows your tastes, and it will be the best food and drink you've ever had. Better yet, you will feast while your adversaries watch in silence, as God prevents them from saying or doing anything to spoil the moment. And best of all, the Lord will eat with you. Like dinner with your favorite celebrity, but infinitely better, because God knows and loves you like no other.

God's VIP treatment is so lavish, says David, that the Lord even anoints his head with oil and his cup overflows. Luke tells the story of when Jesus ate at the home of a Pharisee named Simon.⁴ A sinful woman came and anointed Jesus' feet with her tears and kisses and scented oil. When the Pharisee criticized the woman, Jesus rebuked his host for the terrible hospitality he received, saying "it's *your* responsibility to wash my feet, and greet me with a kiss, and anoint my head with oil, but you've done none of these things. How can you criticize this woman for doing your job?" The same lavish VIP treatment that the woman gave to Jesus is what David says awaits God's children at the banquet he sets for them.

And so, as David reflects on God's provision and God's presence, he makes an important discovery at the end of his journey in verse 6. David, by the way, loves the motif of the journey. Psalm 1 introduces the psalter by describing two paths in life, the way of the wicked vs. the way of the Lord. From that point on all the Psalms in one way or another teach us how to walk in the way of the Lord. Here in Psalm 23, David continues the journey motif in describing how the Lord-as-shepherd leads us besides still waters (v 2), in paths of righteousness (v 3), through the valley of deep darkness (v 4), all the way to the Lord's table (v 5). Now in v 6, David discovers that wherever he has gone, even as he has been following the Lord, it has been the Lord pursuing him:

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the LORD's house forever. Ps. 23:6.*

How does David end up dwelling in Beth Yahweh, the Lord's house forever? By walking in paths of righteousness? Well, it is good and right that he endeavored to do so. Yet if you know David's story, there were some notorious moments when he veered off those paths. So he did not reach the house of the Lord on his own. As it turns out, and now David realizes in v 6, it was the goodness and mercy⁵ of the Lord that doggedly pursued him even when he went astray. God would not let him go. So he made it to the Lord's banquet, and he is even now dwelling in the house of the Lord forever.

⁴ Luke 7:36-50.

⁵ Mercy here may also be translated "lovingkindness" or "covenant faithfulness."

THE LORD'S PROMISE

Having made our own journey through Psalm 23, let's take a moment to reflect on what it means for Christians today. To do so, let's zoom out just a little and see where this Psalm is situated in the Bible.

As we read in verse 6, the journey of Psalm 23 ends at the House of the Lord. If we were to continue reading in the psalter, in Psalm 24, we would read a song about the Lord's homecoming following a victorious battle. In it, David sings:

Lift up your heads, O gates!

And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory?

The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle! (Ps 24:7-8)

For Christians, Psalm 24 foretells the consummation of all things. It looks forward to the day when Jesus, having crushed Satan under his feet, returns triumphant as king and ruler over all.

What if we were to flip back a page and read the psalm immediately preceding Psalm 23? There in Psalm 22 we would find an uncanny description of Jesus' execution, penned by David many centuries before the Romans ever conceived of crucifixion. In Psalm 22 David anticipates the nails piercing Jesus' hands and feet, and the soldiers casting lots for his clothing. The Psalm begins with these haunting words: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

It's no accident that Psalms 22, 23, and 24 are found together, and occur in the order that they do. Taken together they tell the story of the Christian life, and remind us of the Lord's promise to all those who trust in him.

- Because Jesus was forsaken on the cross, his people can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil.
- Because Jesus was raised again on the third day, we have assurance that he is preparing a wedding banquet for his bride, the church, and even now Christians can commune with him in anticipation of that great day.
- Because Jesus ascended to the Father's right hand, he is even now making all things new. And when he returns to judge the living and the dead, his people will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. For Christians, Psalm 23 is for this time between the advents, as we await Jesus' triumphal return and the consummation of all things. The Lord's provision and the Lord's presence, together, remind us of the Lord's promise for what shall be when he comes again. We will dwell in his house forever; that's his certain promise, and reason enough to follow him as your shepherd king.