

Wisdom for Relationships
“Confident in His Loving Care”

Psalm 23

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Good morning. Today we're going to look at a Psalm that has been a favorite Psalm for so many over the years, in fact, is such a favorite that it is memorized by many in the church and many who are not in the church. It's such an important and favorite Psalm that it has been set to music in so many ways, and quite candidly, it has been preached more times than anyone would care to count. In fact, this is a Psalm that is so familiar to so many of us that we run a risk even by looking at it together. Today. And the risk is simply that this familiarity can give way to over familiarity. Overfamiliarity can lead to complacency. And as the saying goes, complacency can even breed contempt. So, thinking that we know everything that there is to know about something that is before us, that can actually put us in a position of missing out on the very greatest truths that we need to hear this morning. So, it's my desire this morning to help us avoid that pitfall of coming to this Psalm with, without giving it much thought. I want to encourage us to look today at David's Psalm and his words in Psalm 23 as words which are fresh and words that are new. This Psalm rightly has been called the pearl of all the Psalms. In fact, it is a pearl of the greatest price tucked inside the shell, which looks so ordinary on the outside, are some of the most important truths we need today, so that we might be confident in our Savior's love in every path of life. So, if you've turned in your Bibles to Psalm 23, also the words are here before us on the screen, I'd like to read the Psalm out loud. As you follow along, silently listen, beginning with verse one.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This is God's holy and inspired word.

By his grace and mercy. May now be preached for you. Please be seated.

Even before we begin unpacking the beauty of everything that is in this one particular Psalm, I think it might be interesting for us just to consider for a moment how this Psalm of David is positioned between the other songs by the leading of God's Holy Spirit. Psalm 23 follows right after Psalm 22 and right before Psalm 24. Yes, that's really profound. But as we look at what those Psalms talk about, Psalm 22 presents, two is the suffering servant who goes to the cross

to pay for our sins so that we might be saved. And yet, Psalm 24 points our attention to the King of glory, who is gathering to himself all who might be saved, so that we might be with him forever. So right there, sandwiched in between suffering and glory, is this pearl of a song, a psalm which gives us confidence in the resurrected Savior as he is leading us now through all of our life. So, having this context in mind, I'd like us to use our time this morning to focus maybe a little less on the imagery of sheep and shepherd that we so commonly tend to focus on when we approach it.

I'd rather we take Psalm 23 and focus instead on the one who is our shepherd, and the confidence which comes from knowing him and what that provides. So look with me again at the opening verses of Psalm 23. As we see this Psalm of David as a psalm of confidence for daily living. The psalmist dives right in. He gives us one of the most precious personal truths we could ever know.

He simply declares in five words of English, four words in Hebrew. The Lord is my shepherd. When we think of that, we can even notice it. If we've never even studied Hebrew in seminary or anywhere else. We can know by looking at our English Bible translations that any time that they give us the word Lord and it's all capital letters, that is a very specific and pointed and personal name for God, a name which he revealed to Moses back in Exodus chapter three at the burning bush.

Moses asked, Lord, who shall I say sent me? And God said, I am who I am. I am the eternal creator of the universe. I am the one who always was, who always is, and who always will be. So many of the wonderful hymns and songs that we already sang this morning dovetail so well with this particular passage, because they have driven our attention precisely back to who God really is Yahweh. And I think David himself, even as he's written these first words, the Lord is my shepherd. He's overwhelmed by it. He's overwhelmed by looking at the enormity of the depth and the breadth and the width of everything that that phrase encompasses. So David cries out in Psalm 24, who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

You see, he is the Lord of hosts. He is the Lord of all creation. He is the one who is all powerful, all knowing, and everywhere present, all at the same time. He is the one who is absolutely pure and who cannot even look on evil. He is the God who will not tolerate any wrongdoing. He is the God who is filled with wrath against every sin.

Yet he is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. His ways are not our ways, meaning he is so beyond the grasp of our finite way of thinking that he transcends all that we can think. We talk about this being the transcendence of God, and yet he tells us he is close to the brokenhearted.

He tells us that he shows compassion to those who fear him. He is the one who tells us, come boldly before my throne of grace, expecting to be met with every need as you come before me. You see God? No, no. Not only is transcendence so far beyond us, so we really can't begin to fully comprehend who he is. But he is imminent. He is Emmanuel, God with us. He is close by

and he wants to be known. He is constantly in the act from creation on. He is constantly revealing himself to us so we might know who he is. He invites us to cast all our cares upon him, knowing how deeply he cares for you. This is the King of Glory, and this is the one that David envisions, even as he writes just those words, the Lord is my shepherd. Personal, intimate, meeting the very need I have. David is a former shepherd himself. He knows what it means to say he is a shepherd. He knows the sheep, needs someone to guide them, to direct them, to protect them from evil. And David is saying, I need that myself. But it can't be any shepherd. It has to be Yahweh.

The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is David's own shepherd. Bible scholars actually believe that David wrote this song not when he was a youth out in the fields tending the sheep that belonged to his father, but rather he likely wrote it later in life, maybe even much later in life, as he is still seated upon the throne, reigning and ruling and overseeing Israel, the sheep of God's pasture.

He is writing this psalm later in life, I think, as he's contemplating everything that he has learned by experience about God. So David knew that the task before him was far too great for him to be able to do on his own. He knew he had a personal need for a shepherd who would not be faulty in any way.

Oh, David was a good shepherd, but David was not a perfect shepherd, and David needed a perfect shepherd. If he was able to be able to, if he was going to be able to do the very things that God had called him to do. You know, I believe if David had been born centuries and centuries later, he would now say with the Apostle Paul, My God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

And he would follow that up by saying, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Do we know the great beauty of that statement? Everything that God has prepared beforehand for us to do for his glory alone. He equips us to be able to do it. We can do everything that God calls us to do by the strength that he alone provides. So now David, who understands the depth of this opening lines so well, he goes on to tell us something of everything that the Lord, the Shepherd, actually provides. Look again at verse two with me. What the Lord our Shepherd is doing for us is the following. He says he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. In each of these very assuring truths, that is the suffering servant Messiah that we saw, that we meet in Psalm 22. Who is the active agent doing the work in Psalm 23? He is the one who is giving it to us. We are the mirror recipients of his loving care. So we may lie down in green pastures, calm and at rest, knowing that our every need has already been supplied. We may actually extract ourselves from the culture of exhaustion that nearly wears us out, as we busy ourselves with thing after thing after thing. Event after event after event, we nearly wear ourselves to a frazzle. And here we get this wonderful picture of rest. He leads me in green pastures and he makes me lie down.

Sheep, or rather skittish animals. They don't naturally lie down to eat or even to rest. They're always on guard. They're always fearful of some danger out there, or even a danger from within. And for sheep to be made to lie down means they are conveying just that. They are safe and that they may indeed rest. Knowing there's someone else is there, providing every need. We also may enjoy the rest of knowing there's no danger threatening us as we follow our Lord. And that's why we're now also able to drink from what is called still waters. They are quieted. You know, throughout Scripture, the waters are such a great imagery of usually of of trial and tribulation, and usually the waters are turbulent enemies.

Trouble is brewing and some sort of judgment may be even falling. But as we look to this, the waters are calm, and in revelation there would be no more sea. It would be silky as glass, because all strife and all animosity, and every danger and every threat that we have ever felt in any moment, of all of our lives combined, will be forever removed.

And we are told the Lord, who is my shepherd, not only makes us lie down in green pastures, but he makes us drink from still waters. Beyond that, he reminds us the causes our souls to be restored, literally to be made whole. Shalom. For things to be made the way they were supposed to be. Well, that can only happen one way.

We only are made back into the image of God in the way that we were supposed to be, in the image of God and knowledge, righteousness, holiness and truth because of the work of Jesus Christ, His Son. So when we look at the the reality that we can be restored or made whole, we need to understand that that's only by faith alone in Christ alone for all he has done for us.

Through Jesus Christ, the default of our lives has now been reset. It's been reset to the purpose for which we actually were created. And Westminster Confession one tells us the reason we were created is so that we might glorify him and enjoy him forever. Well, once we have been fully restored, turned back, put back in the right place as we're supposed to be, as we stand before God, once we have been fully restored and it's time for us to get up and get moving as God leads us beyond where we are.

His gracious leading is what guides us each step of the way. You see, we may follow our Shepherd with full confidence, knowing he always, always leads us in his paths of righteousness. Look again at that phrase. He not only restores my soul, but he leads me in paths of righteousness. Why? For his name's sake. You see, he can do no less than lead me in the right pathway, the right path that develops more and more Christlike character in me and through me, that overflows to others from me.

He can do no less but lead me in that path because it's about him. I love Psalm 115, which begins, not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name. Be all the glory. Whatever we do when we're walking with Jesus Christ, when we're following him on His paths of righteousness, it is only because it is for his name's sake.

God cannot change. He will not change. He will not surrender his glory to another. He will uphold his glory. And when he upholds his glory, we get to shine the light right on him. What a wonderful truth we have already seen in just these few verses. David has assured us we can have confidence in all of life, because all the ways of life are ordered by the one who is putting us exactly where he wants us to do exactly what he has ordained for us to do in such a way that it puts the spotlight only on him.

But it's here where we see Psalm 23 becoming a psalm of confidence, not only when life seems to be going smoothly, but a psalm of confidence for every trial we face. Look again, or listen again to these words found in verse four. Words that many of us know so well. 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. These are sweet words of solace. So many times that we're able to share as a loved one is maybe sick and in a hospital. Also, sweet words of comfort that we're able to give anytime that we're coming alongside a brother or a sister, or even ourselves as we've seen the death of one of our loved ones as they've left this land and stepped into the land of glory.

These words provide comfort and encouragement, and they do so because they give us this imagery that even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil. The shadow of death means something specific to us. For a shadow to overwhelm us, it means we didn't get the real thing. Maybe a little analogy here might be helpful for a rock to fall from a cliff above head and to crush us is one thing, but for that rock to fall from the cliff overhead and to miss us and we just get eclipsed by the shadow is another thing entirely.

You see, we don't bear the brunt. Fall on of what death bring. Why? Because Jesus Christ, the good Shepherd, has already taken that for us. When he went to the cross, he bore our suffering. He bore our sin. He bore our shame. He paid in full for the dead of our sin. He took it upon himself. Why? And therefore we wouldn't have to when he took it on himself. We now only taste the shadow. He took the reality.

But I think there's much more to this verse than to just make a funeral verse or verse about dying. You see, it's the original language here could be just as accurately translated instead of the Valley of the Shadow of Death. It could be translated as the valley of deep darkness. Well, there are many trials in life which come our way that can feel like nothing less than the pit of utter darkness.

You ever walk through a valley with high mountains on both sides? When you do, when the sun sets, you know what you realize as it is getting darker and darker and darker, and you're starting to not be able to see what you had seen before. You're starting to doubt that you know what step to take. You're starting to fear every sound that you hear, and you don't know what's out there. And your imagination begins to run wild with the what ifs and what could be. Because you cannot see where you are going. Well, when we walk through the trials of life and they do inevitably come, and then unfortunately, they don't come just once and they're done. You can

think in your own life, can't you? About all the various iterations of trials and sufferings and tribulations that you have walked through, you and your family and your friends that are closest to you. You know what it means to face the valley of deep, deep darkness, as it just seems unrelenting and the trials just keep coming, one after another after another, and you're starting to question God. How many more do I have to face? And when will they stop coming? We have a shepherd who is right there with us, right beside us. He's walking that path of righteousness with you each step of the way. See the beauty of the way this Psalm is progressing. David says, I have confidence in the Lord because he has been my shepherd with me, going before me with every step of life. He's been the one providing every good thing that I've ever needed. I have no lack of anything that I need. No necessity has gone unmet because he has been before me, but now he is not just before me. He's right here. And when I face that challenge, I want to know he's right here. He's not just up there. He's here beside me. You know what he does when he's here beside me? A shepherd will actually pick up a lamb that is too exhausted to keep going on its own. And he will put that lamb on his shoulders, and he will carry us the next steps of the way. Oh, I'm loving the imagery that David has given us. The Lord goes before us. The Lord is right beside us, and because he is right there beside us, we can actually fear no evil. I wish it said he takes away all evil. You know, really, I don't. Because when we face evil and we trust him, that's how we begin to understand just how good is our God. See, we do face evil, don't we? We face those trials. We face the battles from within. We face the battles from without. But when we face that evil knowing, I don't have to fear it. That's victory.

Only a few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to encourage one of our saints simply by reminding that though the valley of darkness does grow dark, indeed, and it prevents us from seeing what we wish we could see, we are never alone. Even death, which we might call the pinnacle of all the trials that we ever will face, even death itself. Which may want to seem to want to displace the joy that we're supposed to have, and replace it only with fear. Even death itself is no match for our shepherd, who is with us. RC Sproul was unafraid to share the reality of what he endured. He shared that he really didn't fear the the actual dying death itself because he knew who it was that was on the other side, waiting to welcome him home. But he went on to share that he did fear the actual process of dying. Would it be prolonged? Would it be sudden? Would it be filled with pain? Would his faith and testimony in those moments when they were refused to waver, or would he be able to contend for the faith to the very end? See, questions like these for the Christian are actually normal.

So when you're in those trials, those deep, dark valleys, whether it's a trial of just lesser proportions or the actual trial of the death that you face for yourself or one of your loved ones. When we face those questions, remember the very trial itself has been ordained by God. He has sent us the trials to strip us of our self sufficiency and our fake independence. You know, we like to think of ourselves as self-made people, don't we? We like to think of it that I can do this one, Lord, all of my own way. Wait for the big one and then I'll come back to you. And Jesus lovingly

says, no, I want you all the time. So I'm sending more trials. I'm going to send more tests. I'm going to put you in more situations in which you will increasingly learn that you need me. You need to see me as the shepherd going before you. You need to know that I'm the shepherd here beside you, carrying you all the way. You need to know that I alone am your hope in life and death.

And this is where David Gibson relates Psalm 23 to the Heidelberg Catechism. In this way. Psalm 23 is a Hebrew version of the Heidelberg Catechism, long before the Catechism ever was written. Our only hope or confidence in life and in death is to know that everything that we go through in life, the blessings, those things we count as good, and the trials, the adversities that we wish we didn't have to face every one of those is being used by God to make us more and more like his son. That's why he leads us in paths of righteousness.

But there's more that David wants us still to see. He says, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil. Why? For you are with me. There's the confidence that he is with us in every trial of life. And then he says, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. These are two different weapons that were common for every shepherd.

The rod and the staff. The rod was a weapon of defense in order to shed the attackers that might come and try to devour the sheep he could defend. He could defeat the enemies and the staff was something by which he could walk safely and count the sheep, and also pull them back when they want to wander and go astray.

With all this in mind, David can do no less than in verse five. Begin to show us a Psalm that also is our confidence for all eternity. He is our confidence in every step of life. He is our confidence in every trial we face. But he does not stop there. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, he is our confidence still.

Verse five you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Verse six. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. See, David now has switched from talking about Jesus, the shepherd who willingly laid down his life for us, to looking at Jesus as the host of a meal He is preparing for us.

One of the greatest pleasures in our household is whenever we can get together as a family, especially on a Sunday for a Sunday meal and have everybody be there. We used to be able to do that a lot more regularly when we all lived in the same location, but now that we're being more and more spread out, it's becoming increasingly hard to do.

But every time that we get together, you know what I love watching. I love watching my wife Pam. You know what she does? She prepares a table for us to enjoy. She carefully selects the right place, mass, and then she puts out the right complements of plates and dishes and cups and saucers and silver so that everything looks perfect. And then she plates the table with the food, and she puts a centerpiece there, and she lights all the candles, and she prepares for us

not only a feast to enjoy for our bodies, but a feast to devour with our eyes. I hope our kids never miss the beauty of what she does. Every time we have a meal like that.

But you know, as much as I enjoy watching my wife enjoy doing the hard work behind the scenes and preparing for us that table, there's a better table yet to come, and Jesus himself is the one preparing it. Can you imagine anything about that? How Jesus must be looking ahead. Pam just can't wait for that moment when the kids and the grandkids all get to the table and her dad is there to join us, and we sit there and we have that feast.

Can you imagine when Jesus says, come on, it's time for us to feast?

Well, there's hardly enough time to really unpack the truths from these verses, but this much does deserve our attention. Jesus in his life often sat and dined with sinners. Those who were still rejecting him sat at his table as his enemies. Because if you're not for Christ, you are against him.

While Shepherd is preparing a table for us, where we may dine with him in the presence of our enemies, as well. But I don't think Dave is really presenting this imagery as though he's describing some act of vengeance or retribution. Payback that finally comes to those who have opposed us. Rather, he seems to be presenting this meal with it in the context of a meal, which is a gracious act of kindness.

The focus in this verse is not on the enemy, but it's rather on the host and those he welcomes to his table. You all who are guests of the King, find the king anointing their heads with oil. Now this is in keeping with the Middle Eastern custom of David's day. Whenever guests would arrive in a meal was to be served, the King would make sure that the guests had had been anointed with sweet smelling perfume.

Why? Because they just travel long distance. They've arrived covered in sweat and dirt. Feet would be washed and heads would be anointed with oil to cover over the body. Odor of the dirtiness of those who had just arrived. Then the host. We began pouring the wine, pouring and pouring and pouring until the cup is not only full, but the cup is overflowing out over the cup, onto the floor, out of the floor, right out of the door.

Do you see the connection between this verse and what it is that we are actually doing right now in this room this morning?

Each of us who by faith have come here to see, to worship, to sit at the table. We have come by faith as those who are his invited guests. But we came still in need of cleansing. We came sort of stinky and smelly and covered with selfishness and pride and vainglory. But you know what Jesus has been doing even as we've been unpacking his word, he's been anointing our heads with oil. He's been filling us afresh with the presence of his Spirit, that we might receive His Word into our lives and have His Word change who we are. And he has been pouring the wine of his forgiveness out upon us freely, so that we might not only be forgiven, but we might

forgive others, even as we have in Christ, been forgiven ourselves over for some who are here this morning, it is possible. That you're just on the outside looking in.

You're the enemies that he talks about being at the table, because you have yet to come to the place where God has shown you your need of Jesus Christ as your Savior and your Lord. But that's okay. I'm glad you're here. Don't fret. You should be here. You're supposed to be here. God brought you here this morning on purpose to see the Feast of worship, even as it's being devoured. He brought you here to see what worship is. All about, so that you might recognize the deep hunger of your soul and know that it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance and to salvation. So we all may rest assured, because God, when he sets a table before us, is a host who is far from stingy. He is continually anointing us with mercy and grace. To paraphrase slightly Hadden Robinson, that distinguished professor of preaching who now has been home of the Lord these past seven years. Listen to what he says for the table that is prepared by Jesus. The calf is always the fatted calf. The robe is always the best. The joy is unspeakable, and the peace surpasses our understanding.

There is no grudging in God's goodness. He doesn't measure it out to us. Drop by drop. Rather, he pours it out on us in floods. And if we would only recognize the lavish abundance of his gifts, what a difference it would make. Recognizing and receiving the lavish love of God poured out on us through Jesus Christ, His Son. I think it's what makes that last verse of this chapter so sweet. You see David, with all the confidence that he had gained as he, looking back on this life, could see how God had been going before him. Each step of the way.

And David, with all the confidence that he gained, even as he himself is likely drawing nearer and nearer and nearer to his moment of death, he now asserts with conviction. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. I think much of the rich imagery of this verse in the original language is lost in translation. Charles Spurgeon likens goodness and mercy to the footmen who run alongside of us on the journey, clearing the path ahead of us and beside of us, and guarding the rear even as we move forward, step by step on the journey. On our way to glory. And these footmen, goodness and mercy. There are no slackers. It's a weak translation to say they shall follow me all the days of my life. Literally. It means they will be in hot pursuit of me every inch of the way.

Oh, now we see the full depth and breadth of the song. We have a shepherd who goes before us. Providing everything we need. No necessity. He goes on that we have a shepherd that's right here beside us. Even willing to carry us when it gets too hard. But we also have a shepherd who is bringing up the rear guard and hemming us in with his goodness and his mercy. And it's going to be ours. Not just now, but for all eternity. It'll never be away. We will. By faith in Jesus Christ. We will forever be in the presence of our Lord before us, beside us, behind us. So let's try to tie this all together and make it into something that we can actually remember. Tomorrow when we run to the store, we go back to work.

See, David has led us through this Psalm, helping us see how God Himself is our Shepherd, going before us every day of our lives, providing peace and tranquil setting as he personally supplies everything we need. Some of your wants will go unfulfilled because he knows you don't need those, but all your needs he will fulfill because he can do no less.

David also has assured us that God Himself is our Shepherd, right beside us when we need to know his presence most, even as we face. Yet another trial, or another tragedy, or another adversity, which inevitably will keep coming our way. But last we see that David has shown us that God Himself is our Shepherd, pursuing us every day with his goodness and his mercy. Not only in this life, but for all eternity. Christ before us, Christ beside us. Christ behind us. Surrounding us with his loving care. All the confidence we need is him. The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything I need because I have him. The Lord is my shepherd. I have nothing to fear because he is with me until the end of the age. And the Lord is my shepherd. And because I know this certainty to be true, I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Now or forever. Amen.

Lord, we thank you and Lord, we praise you. Lord of lords and King of Kings. The one I can't even begin to really comprehend. You reveal yourself to me so that you are close beside me. And in intimacy I draw closer to you. As you draw me to yourself. The Lord is not only for life or death that you are leading. It is for all eternity. So, thank you father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for being the great Shepherd of the sheep, the one who is with us, for us and beside us and behind us every step of the way.

We thank you and we praise you in Jesus' name.

Amen.