

# The LORD Is My Shepherd

Text: Psalm 23:1-6

Series: The Psalms [#22]

Pastor Lyle L. Wahl

September 26, 2010

Theme: **God Shepherds His Sheep Perfectly.**

## Introduction

Psalm 23 is one of the most familiar Psalms, and also one of the most familiar parts of all the Bible. The inscription tells us it was written by King David. We know he tended his family's sheep as a youth. We don't know when he wrote this Psalm, but in it he draws on his experience of caring for sheep as he reflects on his relationship with God. That experience was familiar to the people of Israel.

This Psalm is a refreshing compliment to some of the Psalms we have looked at so far in this series.

- To Psalm 1 which contrasts the righteous and the wicked.
- To Psalm 2 which portrays God as the invincible warrior who defeats all His enemies.
- To Psalm 15 which declares that fellowship with God requires integrity.
- To Psalm 130 which explores those times when God seems to be silent, when we are waiting for Him.
- To Psalms 58 and 59 which call on God to judge the wicked.

Psalm 23 has brought comfort and encouragement to many as they walked the dark valley of sickness, suffering and death. But the value and purpose of the Psalm extends beyond that important and precious role. This is a Psalm for every believer every day. Every believer can say "*The LORD is my shepherd.*" King David reflected on God being his shepherd and was awed and thankful that *God shepherds His people perfectly.*

God is a shepherd to His people. We see this same analogy in the opening lines of Psalm 80, "Oh, give ear, Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock..." God spoke comfort to the people of Judah in Isaiah 40 as He told them that though they would go into exile for their rebellion, He would one day restore them. Verse 11, "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes."

What does God want to show us through this word picture of Himself as the Shepherd and His people as the sheep? Being familiar with sheep and shepherds can be helpful, but we get the picture God intends from the Psalm itself. David states the aspects of the shepherd-sheep relationship which underpin this Psalm.

## God Provides For All Our Needs.

*God shepherds His people perfectly.* As our shepherd he provides for all our needs. David begins, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.” “I shall not want.” The basic sense of this word is to diminish, and so to lack, or have a need.

When Noah and his family were in the ark, after the rain stopped and “God caused a wind to pass over the earth,” the waters “*receded*,” they “*decreased*.”<sup>1</sup> Both *receded* and *decreased* are this word *want*. When God provided manna to feed Israel in the wilderness, there was “*no lack*” of food.<sup>2</sup> Again, it’s the same word. Turn ahead to Psalm 34. David gives an invitation in verse 8. “O taste and see that the LORD is good; how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!” Then he describes that blessed person in part in verse 10, “... they who seek the LORD *shall not be in want* of any good thing.”

This statement “I shall not want” can and should give us hope. But it also raises questions as we know some of God’s people are poor, suffer and even die of hunger. Let’s begin putting all that together by looking at God’s provisions to David that met all his needs.

First, God provided the nourishment and rest he needed. Look at verse 2.

“He [God] makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” (2-3)

The scene of sheep eating and resting comfortably in green pastures is easy to picture. Many of the paintings and photographs of sheep are like that—rolling hills or plains with lush green grass. You may find some scenes like that in Palestine, but rocky rolling hills with more brown than lush green are more common, especially in the hot, dry summer. The scene and truth, then, is of God’s lush, luxuriant provision to David even in a dry and parched situation.

God also led him beside “quiet waters.” That may seem to be just a metaphoric scene of peace and quiet. But people who know sheep tell us that sheep don’t like rapidly rushing waters. One writer reports seeing shepherds in Israel digging a trench from a fast-moving stream to create a quiet pool of water. Only after they created that quiet pool did the sheep come to drink. He went on to note that “Sheep have been known to die from thirst alongside abundant rushing water.”<sup>3</sup> David tells us God provided what he needed in the way he needed it.

In Ezekiel 34 God said,

“I will feed them [His people] in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest...” (14-15)

Yes, God provides the nourishment and rest we need in the way we need it.

Verse 2 begins, “He restores my soul.” God provides refreshing and restoration to His sheep. The idea at the root of this word *restore* is to turn back, to return; and so then, to restore and to refresh. Back in Psalm 19 David wrote, “The law of the LORD is perfect, *restoring* the soul” (7a). In Psalm 36 he testified that those who trust God drink their fill from God’s abundance<sup>4</sup> and, he adds in Psalm 65, they will be *satisfied* with the goodness of God’s house, or of being in His presence.<sup>5</sup> David experienced his Shepherd’s perfect care in turning him around and bringing him back, in refreshing and restoring him at the deepest levels.

Then, going on in verse 3, David tells us that God gives us the right guidance. “He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” God led him in “the paths of righteousness.” Even today in Israel there are paths on the hillsides that shepherds use to lead their sheep to find grass. It is common for families to use one path for generations. They use *their path*, and not different paths that other families also have used for generations. Over time the paths can become well-worn, deep ruts. Those shepherds lead their sheep in the *right ruts*.<sup>6</sup>

God always leads us on the right path, the path of righteousness, the path that conforms to His perfect character and truth. He never wavers, let alone leads us on a path that is not right for us, not righteous. The path will not always be easy for us, but it is the path that leads us to true nourishment and rest, to being refreshed and restored.

This brings great assurance—God always leads us in the right way! But how do we know His right path? *Follow the Shepherd!* How do we do that? In Psalm 119:35, the writer prayed, “Make me walk *in the path of Your commandments*, for I delight in it.” Then later, in verse 105, he told God “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” We follow our Shepherd as we read and follow His word.

And then don’t rush past the last part of verse 3 which tells us that God does this “for His name’s sake.” God guides us because He has chosen us, called us, saved us, is transforming us to be like Christ and because He has promised that we will be with Him forever. He guides us for our benefit, but even more, to demonstrate and uphold His character and honor by being faithful to His promises.

God provides for all our needs. He shepherds us perfectly as He provides nourishment and rest, refreshing and restoration and the right guidance. So, “I shall not want.” That word, this Psalm, all the Bible and our own experience tells us this does not mean God gives us everything we want. We can look back with relief and joy that God didn’t give us some things *we really wanted!*

This Psalm underscores the truth that God provides all our deepest needs for as long as He leaves us here on earth. We know from the Bible and our own lives that doesn’t mean we will always have health, relationships, work and money. It means God will give us what

we need to survive and, even more, *to thrive* in our relationship with Him ... as we follow Him, as we follow our Shepherd.

### **God Protects Us In Danger.**

Then, God's perfect shepherding includes protecting us in danger. He goes with us in the darkest, most dangerous times. Let's pick it up at verse 4. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

Walking through the valley of the shadow of death. The word valley can prompt pictures of a pleasant, gentle, even beautiful valley. But the word David used here can also refer to a steep, narrow, dangerous gorge or ravine. Some scholars think the word usually translated "the shadow of death" could more accurately be something like "the darkest darkness." So the phrase could be something like "Even though I walk through the darkest valley." Even if that is correct, the darkest darkness includes death. The phrase, to me at least, points to all the dark and dangerous ravines on our path, including the valley of the shadow of death.

When we walk with someone we know and love who is dying, we know how dark the darkness can be. When we ourselves enter the steep, dark ravine of death, we will know how dark the darkness can be. "*But! But,*" the king tells us, "we can know that even then God our Shepherd is with us! Even when we can't see the next step, He leads us!" We can know that the darkest, most steep and dangerous ravine is, as one man wrote, "as truly one of [God's] 'right paths' as are the green pastures."<sup>7</sup> *God shepherds His sheep perfectly.* He goes with us even in the darkest, most dangerous times.

And in those times, God frees us from fear. King David was not naively pollyannaish when he wrote, "I fear no evil." He went through many shadow of death experiences.

- As a teen, perhaps a young teen, he went up against a lion and a bear to protect his family's flock.<sup>8</sup>
- As a teen he stood up to the Philistine's great champion Goliath when no man in Israel's army would.<sup>9</sup>
- After God selected him to replace Saul as King, he often was on the run as Saul tried to kill him.<sup>10</sup>
- As King he led armies into battle.<sup>11</sup>

He faced the darkest valleys of death many times.

In those times God his Shepherd led him.

In those times God was *with* him, beside him.

In those times he experienced the fulfillment of his prayer in Psalm 28:9, "*Save Your people and bless Your inheritance; be their shepherd also, and carry them forever.*"

In those times he knew the truth of Isaiah's prophecy, "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes."<sup>12</sup>

God protected David with His rod and staff. Shepherds used the rod, or club, to fend off predators. Today many shepherds have replaced the rod with the rifle. The purpose is the same—protect the sheep. The staff was used as a walking stick and also to guide the sheep in the right direction or get them out a place where they shouldn't be.

And so, when he was running for his life from his son Absalom David could know and testify, "I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me round about."<sup>13</sup> Again, in Psalm 27:3, "Though a host encamp against me, my heart will not fear; though war arise against me, in spite of this I shall be confident."

Why? Because, as he wrote in Psalm 56, "When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I have put my trust; I shall not be afraid. What can mere man do to me?" (3-4)

Why? Because He was following His Shepherd who led him, was with him and carried him.

God, our Shepherd, has not changed. As he freed David from fear of the deepest shadows, even the shadow of death, he will free you from fear. *God shepherds you perfectly.*

God's protection extends to giving us victory over our enemies. We go on at verse 5. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows." The scene is a military victory celebration. God is the host, the King who holds a banquet to celebrate the victory over the enemies. David is the honored guest. His defeated enemies are there to display that they no longer are threats but defeated, humbled and subjugated. God is the One who gives victory and leads the celebration. David is anointed with oil to symbolize his being a valued and honored guest. His cup overflows with blessings from God, with amazement, worship and thanksgiving to God. And so he could testify in Psalm 27:6, "And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies around me, and I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD."

Our battles are not military. Neither are our battles really with other people, even with those who attack us. "Our struggle," the apostle Paul wrote, "is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."<sup>14</sup> And, as we follow our Shepherd, we can say with the apostle Paul, "... thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place."<sup>15</sup>

And this too is because *God shepherds His sheep perfectly.* He provides for all our needs. He protects us in danger.

## God Pours Out Love To Us Always And Forever.

And God shepherds us perfectly as He pours out love to us always and forever. Look at verse 6. “Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life...” The word *follow* means to follow behind, but also has the force of *pursuing*. In Psalm 7 David cried out to God, “Save me from all those who *pursue* me...” (1) That’s the same word. In Psalm 34:14 he wrote “Seek peace and *pursue* it.” An intensive use of this word can even mean to *persecute*.<sup>16</sup>

God pursues us with goodness and lovingkindness. God our Shepherd who leads us in the righteous way also chases after us with goodness and lovingkindness. God is good. Goodness is part of His unchanging, constant, eternal character. God was, is and always will be good. All that He does is good. Psalm 73 opens with “Surely God is *good* to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!” and closes with “... as for me, the nearness of God is *my good*.”

God’s lovingkindness is His steadfast kindness based on His pure, unconditional love. This ideas of strength, loyalty and endurance are also basic to this word.<sup>17</sup> In Psalm 25:10 David wrote, “All the paths of the LORD are lovingkindness and truth to those who keep His covenant and His testimonies.” Then in Psalm 103 he tells us, “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him” (11), and “the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him...” (17). Yes, God pursues His sheep. He pursues us with goodness and lovingkindness.

The Psalm closes with the truth, with God’s promise of His presence and fellowship forever. Verse 6 again. “Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life...” This is a wonderful truth. David failed. We fail. God will never fail or forsake His people.<sup>18</sup> Toward the end of the New Testament record the writer of Hebrews picks up this truth, reminding us that “[God] Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.’”<sup>19</sup>

You can be confident that God will pour out His love, His goodness and lovingkindness, all the days of your life. The bright days of joy and celebration. The dark days of sorrow and mourning.

And it is not just for all the days of your life here on earth. David’s final words are “and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever,” or, “to the length of days.” The people of the Old Testament saw eternity as an endless length of days.

When we fast forward to the New Testament, Jesus told His disciples and us that “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”<sup>20</sup> When the apostle Paul writes about the return of Christ for us, he tells us that when that takes place we “... will be caught up together ... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so *we shall always be with the Lord*.”<sup>21</sup> *God shepherds His sheep perfectly*. He pours out His love to us always and forever.

## Conclusion.

This beautiful Psalm has wonderful, encouraging truth for us. David joyfully, confidently shouted, sang, “The LORD is *my* shepherd!” Can you say that with joy and confidence?

*God shepherds His sheep perfectly.* Jesus is the good shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep.<sup>22</sup> We remembered and celebrated that in our observance of Communion this morning. “[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”<sup>23</sup> All who hear his voice and accept His invitation to put their trust in Him are forgiven of all their sins, and then have God as their shepherd.

So again I ask, “Can you say with joy and confidence that God is your shepherd?” Make sure you can today. Think about it. Talk to God about it in the time of quiet reflection and response in a few moments. Talk with me, Pastor Tyler or someone else here today. We are here to listen, answer your questions and point you to Jesus.

If you can say “Yes! *God is my shepherd!*”, what kind of sheep have you been lately? Have you been listening to God through His word? Have you been following Him, or wandering off on your own paths? As you look at yourself as one of God’s sheep, clear up, confess, turn from any sin or complacency and turn back to following your Shepherd. Invite Him, welcome Him to shepherd you. Make a commitment, or renew your commitment to follow Him.

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 8:1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 16:18.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Barclay Allen. *When Song Is New*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983, pp. 76-77.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 36:7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 65:4.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, pp. 77-78.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Kidner. *Psalms 1-72*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Samuel 17:34.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Samuel 17:1-56.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Samuel 18:10-19; 19:1, 11-12; 20:30-31, etc.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Samuel 2:8-4:12; 5:1-25, etc.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 40:11.

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 3:6.

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 6:12.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:14.

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 69:26; 109:16; 119:84, 86, etc.

<sup>17</sup> See Loren O. Wahl. *Chesed, God's Unconditional Love And The Resulting Responsibilities Of Man*.

Th.M. Thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1970.

<sup>18</sup> cf. Deuteronomy 31:6, 8; Joshua 1:5; Psalm 37:28.

<sup>19</sup> Hebrews 13:5.

<sup>20</sup> John 14:3.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

<sup>22</sup> John 10:1-18.

<sup>23</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21.

© 2010 Lyle L. Wahl

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®,  
Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995  
by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.