

## Bible Study — Psalm 23

### The Character of Christ [pt. 6]: GOODNESS

Psalm 23 is likely the best loved psalm of all the psalms in scripture. It is a wonder why such a psalm, with pastoral imagery of sheep and shepherd, would resonate with so many in modern times. Few of us have even seen flocks of sheep, let alone an actual shepherd. And yet this Psalm still speaks deeply to our souls.

I think it still speaks deeply to us moderns because the metaphors used in Psalm 23 are eternally and spiritually true. God as shepherd is one of the oldest metaphors for God that Israel employed to understand their relationship to him. Yet this picture always concerned the nation as a whole, God shepherding ALL of his people. The traditional picture was of God as Shepherd and **WE** as his sheep.

Psalm 23 makes a radical shift in the understanding of this picture of God. In Psalm 23, God is Shepherd, but **I** am his sheep. The shepherd of the flock, in Psalm 23, is not only concerned for the flock, but has a special concern for me. In this regard Psalm 23 anticipates Jesus' image of the Good Shepherd leaving the 99 to go find the 1 which is lost (*Luke 15:1-7*).

It is a testimony of absolute trust and dependence on the shepherd. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." In a culture like ours that has taught us to want many things, can we truly say, "I want nothing, because the Lord is my shepherd." It is a testimony proclaiming that as long as the Lord is his shepherd, he lacks nothing. For as long as the Lord is his shepherd, he has all that he needs.

But listen, this isn't simply some pie-in-the-sky spiritual fulfillment the Psalmist is singing about. It's about real food and real drink (*vv. 2, and 5*). It's about real shelter and real protection (*vv. 4, and 6*). It's about real and genuine life (*v. 3*), and the very real presence of the Shepherd (*v. 4; see also Matthew 4:4, 6:33; John 4:31-34*).

"So long as the Lord is my Shepherd, and no other, I shall not want because I shall not lack" (*Psalm 34:9-10*). I shall never lack because the Lord's goodness and mercy (*v. 6*) pursue me ("*follow me*" isn't strong enough for the actual Hebrew word) **all** of my days. And I will live in His house for **all** of my days.

In a world where so much that 'pursues' us intends to do us harm, isn't it a joy to know that our Shepherd's goodness and mercy also pursue us. Pursue to protect and provide for us. Pursue us to give every good gift that accords to his will for

our wholeness. Pursue us to always be present with us (v. 4). The relationship is the key. The Psalmist knows the goodness and mercy of the Lord because the Psalmist knows the Lord to be his shepherd, leading, guiding, protecting, providing — all of his days, but especially through those dark valleys.

There is a story of an old man and a young man on the same platform before a large audience. It was a special program that was being presented. As a part of the program each man was to repeat from memory the words of Psalm 23.

The young man, trained in the best speech techniques and dramatic presentation, gave an eloquent and emotional speech worthy of the Psalmist himself. “The Lord is my shepherd...” vividly and colorfully resounded from his voice. When he finished, the audience clapped and cheered, asking him for an encore so that they might hear again his wonderful voice.

Then the old gentleman, leaning heavily on his cane, stepped to the front of the same platform, and in a feeble, shaky voice, repeated the same words — “The Lord is my shepherd...” But when he was seated no sound came from the listeners. The people seemed to be praying.

In the silence, the young man stood to make the following statement: “Friends, I wish to give an explanation. You asked me to come back and repeat the Psalm, but you remained still in stunned silence when my friend here was seated. Why the difference? I will tell you the difference. I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd!”

The image of the shepherd and the flock may not mean much to our modern imaginations. But if ever there was a people on this earth that resembled a flock of frightened sheep it is now. Governments are afraid. People are afraid of governments, of other people, and some are even afraid of themselves.

Psalm 23 has been sung for more than twenty-five centuries, across the barriers of time, and race, and language. The reason it is so treasured in the hearts of people is not because it is a great piece of literature, though it is that. It is because it tells us that beyond the hungers and weaknesses of mankind, above the strife and fears that threaten to overwhelm us, there is a Shepherd.

A little girl was once asked by her Sunday school teacher to recite the Psalm 23. She started out with, “The Lord is my shepherd, He’s all I want...” That’s not how it goes, but she’s closer to what the psalmist intended. “I shall not want” means “I

shall not lack (NIV).” And so at the core of it, “I shall not want” means that whatever else is withheld, I shall not lack because the shepherd never withholds himself. Isn’t that good news? That no matter how wrong this world seems to be, the Shepherd’s presence with us makes all the difference. And we like the Psalmist can exclaim “I shall not want...”

**May you, in this coming week, come to know the Shepherd’s goodness and mercy which pursues you, provides for you, and protects you. May you know the presence of the Shepherd in your own dark valleys. And may you, even now, dwell in His presence.**

### **Questions for Further Reflection**

What green pastures and still waters has God led you to? Any dark valleys through which God walked with you? How has God rescued or protected you with his rod and staff? (*NOTE: sometimes the rescuing and protection feel like discipline.*)

If ‘God as shepherd’ is the first image used in the psalm (vv. 1-4), what is the second image used (vv. 5-6)? With what would you like your cup to overflow?

Read the Psalm in the negative. What verse is most disturbing?

**Elton Trueblood** noted that you can’t move from speaking of the Lord as ‘he’ to speaking of the Lord as ‘thou’ unless he is present. The move from third person ‘he’ to second person ‘you’ means that the Lord is present. You can speak of someone in the second person only if they are present.

How significant is it that the second person pronouns begin to be used right in the middle of the Psalm, in verse 4, when the Psalmist enters the valley of the shadow of death? Do you think there is a theological significance or is it just a poetic coincidence?

What does it mean to you that the Lord prepares a table for you in the presence of your enemies? That your head is anointed with oil? What are the possible meanings of “anointment” (*1 Samuel 16:13; Luke 7:46*)? That goodness and mercy pursue you all of your life? That you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever? When does this “dwelling” in the Lord’s house begin? How can our dwelling in the house of the Lord begin today?