

PSALM 23

The Enduring Presence of God...

SCRIPTURE TEXT: PSALM 23 (ESV)



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Oak Hills
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Timeless Words:

There is perhaps no more famous and known passage of scripture in the world than Psalm 23. Written by David, who in his life was both a shepherd and a king, this beautiful poem speaks of our God in terms of also being both Shepherd and King, and who treats His people both as members of His flock, and princes and princesses of His household. The words are encouraging, timeless and the subject of our focus now.

Psalm 23

A psalm of David

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

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

³he restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴Even 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.

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

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

Floating Alone:

I grew up in the farm land of Indiana. My grandfather who lived next door grew bamboo just for the fun of it. He would watch it grow from little green shoots to 20 foot golden rods—easy to bend and hard to break. When it was mature, he'd cut it all down and throw it on the bush pile, and at that moment, it became the property of my brother and me. There was so much you could do with it. Of course we made swords, but occasionally our visions for that bamboo would get lofty.

Buck Creek ran about 100 yards from my front door. One day, with bamboo, bailing twine, some milk jugs and the inspiration of Huck Finn, I set out to build a raft that would carry me down that creek. As I built the raft, it became apparent that I lacked the skills to make anything “seaworthy.” My vision was of a solid vessel that would carry me to the next tributary, and eventually on to the mighty Mississippi. But what I ended up with was a flimsy collection of knots and shoots and jugs that I couldn't even carry down to the creek without it falling apart.

I remember it was very frustrating. Perhaps you know the feeling. You have a dream or a want, and you think you're working toward it, but in the end, you don't get what you hoped for, and you think the initial vision ought to correspond with the finished product somewhat. But in this case, the end product was just too far from the initial vision, and I was angry. And I remember that I was angry with God about it. I was mad that He didn't make this work out better. In my anger, I prayed a prayer I still remember to this day. I said, “God, if you are good at all to people, make this piece of junk work. Otherwise, how do You expect me to believe in you.” The raft failed to even make it to the bank, and I considered God to be deaf to my prayer.

Humankind is asking a very basic question—is there a God out there and if so, can he be trusted? My prayer, I've since come to understand, was terribly shortsighted. I made the mistake of assuming that raft a big enough deal to determine the goodness of God. God was kind to me that day by allowing my raft to fail, because I knew that if He really was good, He'd have to show it in a bigger way than by making the shoddy collection of jugs, shoots and twine float for a ten year old boy.

God was kind to teach me that His kindness is found in much bigger things—much more eternal things. He is not good because He makes our autonomous endeavors stand. He is good because He knows our need better than we do and He meets them all in the richness of His grace through Christ Jesus His Son. He does more than teach us to float alone. He leads us through the trials of life and gives us an eternal place at His side for all eternity. We shall not want.

The Truth About Sheep:

This Psalm basically begins with a prepositional statement, “Since the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” This is the theme of the Psalm—a theme that begins by likening man to sheep. Shepherding is perhaps one of the globe's oldest enduring professions. And over the years, through our means for shepherding have changed, sheep have not. This Psalm highlights the fact that sheep are helpless, timid and defenseless.

SHEEP ARE HELPLESS—VS. 2.

They do not know how to care for themselves. The shepherd makes them lie down to rest and he leads them beside quite waters. It is the shepherd who meets the most basic needs of the sheep, needs that would otherwise remain unmet. We are helpless—not knowing what we most need—but God cares for those needs. Because we're helpless, God cares for our needs.

SHEEP ARE TIMID—VS. 3.

The shepherd guides sheep along “paths of righteousness”—a Hebrew euphemism for a well-worn path. The sheep are so timid they won’t even take a well-used path without prodding. The Shepherd restores “my soul”—which means my life or myself. From what? Well, the shepherd restores in essentially two distinct ways—1) he retrieves the wanderers and 2) he revives the wounded—as Spurgeon said, “perverse or ailing though they may be.” Because we’re timid, God leads us.

SHEEP ARE DEFENSELESS—VS. 4.

The Shepherd uses two tools—a rod and a staff. The rod is a club-like tool used to ward off predators and enemies. It is a tool of defense. The staff is a long stick with a hooked end that is used as a tool to control and discipline the sheep in the flock when they wander or lag behind. The valley of the shadow of death is the darkest place imaginable. It is in these times that the Lord protects us with His rod and staff. “The darkness is not dark to God. (Ps 139)” Because we’re defenseless, God protects us.

For His Name’s Sake:

Sheep are what they are—helpless, timid and defenseless. But the Shepherd occupies a beautiful position of grace in their lives—one so significant they can’t fully comprehend it. He is everything to them. He is more than a hired hand. A good shepherd would lay down his life for his sheep. Jesus said a good shepherd would leave his flock of 99 to find one lost sheep. The shepherd lived among his flock. David himself recounts in other places how he fought off a bear and a lion while tending his flock. The shepherd does not from danger, but fights on behalf of his flock when danger arrives.

This, David tells us, is what God is like. But he doesn’t just tell us **that** God treats us this way, he also tells us **why**. We see in verse 3 that the Lord leads His sheep in paths of righteousness “for His name’s sake.” David is saying that the Lord leads His flock in the right way because it is His good pleasure to do so.

A Seat At The Table...

So is that it? Are we are more than just helpless, timid and defenseless sheep. Verses 5-6 shift the metaphor from being a sheep to a guest of honor in the palace of the King. This is important because many times we look at this Psalm and simply infer that we are just dumb sheep. But this is **not** how this Psalm concludes. We are image-bearers of God—crowned with glory and honor, according to Psalm 8. And we learn here that the Lord places us at His table as guests of honor—signified by having our heads anointed with oil.

I want to turn briefly to another episode in David’s life, 2 Sam 9, because it gives us a beautiful picture of the blending of these two metaphors of being sheep and princes at the King’s table. It is the story of Mephibosheth, the descendant of Saul.

2 Samuel 9:1-7 ¹David asked, “Is there anyone still left on the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan’s sake?” ²Now there was a servant of Saul’s household named Ziba. They called him to appear before David, and the king said to him, “Are you Ziba?” “Your servant,” he replied. ³The king asked, “Is there no one left of the house of Saul to whom I can show God’s kindness?”

Ziba answered the king, “There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in both feet.”

⁴“Where is he?” the king asked. Ziba answered, “He is at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar.” ⁵So King David had him brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel.

⁶When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honor.

David said, “Mephibosheth!” “Your servant,” he replied. ⁷“Don’t be afraid,” David said to him, “for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table.”

Mephibosheth for all intents and purposes would have been thought of by many as a natural enemy of David because he was of the line of Saul—the king David replaced. But David swore an oath to show kindness to Saul’s son Jonathan—the father of Mephibosheth. When Mephibosheth was found and brought before the King, he was like a sheep—helpless, timid and defenseless. What he was given was a permanent place at the King’s table like one of the King’s own sons. I imagine that it would have been hard to receive this kindness, because it meant that Mephibosheth had to come to believe that his place was not as a fugitive from his father’s arch rival, but as a person wanted at the table of the King. It can be hard to accept grace.

Enduring Presence of God:

This Psalm’s theme is the enduring presence of God. It begins with the claim that God is our Shepherd—ever present with us. In the middle of the Psalm we read, “I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” And it ends with, “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house if the Lord forever.” This Psalm answers the question Psalm 22 asked, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” The answer is that God has not forsaken his people, but rather has bound himself to them, helpless, timid and defenseless though they are.

As a ten year old building that raft, I believed that God needed to demonstrate his kindness by making my raft float. But God demonstrated his kindness in that while I was still a sinner, His Son Jesus Christ died the death I deserved so I could have life. The message of this Psalm is that the Lord is always present. As your Shepherd, He cares for you, guides you and protects you. As your King, He seats you at His table like one of His own children and dignifies your life as precious to Him. If you are a Christian, you are an heir with Christ.

Where are you looking as you search for the presence and goodness of God? Are you like me when I was ten, placing my whole perception of God on whether He made my raft work? And if that is all you look to, is that the kind of God worth living for? Jesus says in John 10:11-18, “I am the good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep... I know my sheep and my sheep know me—Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” You needed Jesus to lay down His life for you. You are known by the Good Shepherd. He knows your needs better than you. Take your seat at His table. His presence endures all.