

Psalm 23 — A PSALM OF DAVID. (Part I)

Introduction

This morning, we have the privilege of reflecting on the first four verses of Psalm 23. Of course, Psalm 23 is one of the most famous and beloved of all the Psalms, and even one of the most famous and beloved chapters in all of Scripture. Some of the reasons for this are good. But then there are other reasons that Psalm 23 has become so beloved that are not at all good, and are, in fact, even dangerous. The key to embracing the true power and beauty of this Psalm is found partly in recognizing that there *is* a counterfeit beauty. In a sense, it's only when we've identified this counterfeit beauty and rejected it, that we can be all the more amazed and full of joy at the true beauty of Psalm 23. The psalmist begins:

I. Psalm 23:1a — The LORD is...

In the Hebrew, the very first word of Psalm 23 is not “the” (“*the* LORD”) and it's not simply a title (“lord”); it's God's personal, covenant name: Yahweh, or Jehovah (cf. Exod. 3:13-15; 6:2-3; 34:6-7). In the Hebrew, the very first word of Psalm 23 is a *name*. And it's this name, appearing as it does right out of the gate (and then also concluding the psalm in verse six), that truly sets the tone and the theme for the rest of the psalm (cf. Craigie).

It's one thing to know *about* a “covenant relationship”; it's another thing to be *in one*. It's one thing to know *about* God and His covenant name; it's another thing to *know* that covenant name experientially – in the context and the world of an intimate covenant relationship. And so, on the one hand, we know that Psalm 23 is powerfully “experiential” and “relational.” On the other hand, it becomes equally clear that Psalm 23 is not just “sentimentalism.” It's not just about warm and happy feelings. That's the counterfeit beauty. Psalm 23 is the expression of what it actually means and what it actually looks like to live *in covenant relationship* with God. And so it's only against the backdrop of the meaning of covenant that we can truly rejoice in the experience of covenant relationship – which is what Psalm 23 is all about. Psalm 23 isn't just about a fuzzy relationship, it's about a relationship that's defined by covenant. Therefore, the only way to guard against sentimentalism in Psalm 23 is to read it carefully and joyfully *as* the prayer of someone *in covenant* with God.

We need to understand covenant, then, first of all in terms of the **sovereignty** of God. We don't initiate covenants with God or make covenants with God, He alone can initiate covenants with us and make covenants with us. Can you see how obvious and self-evident this is? And yet it's a profoundly important and wonderful thing for us to meditate on. We don't initiate covenants with God or make covenants with God, He alone can initiate covenants with us and make covenants with us.

In the same vein, God doesn't make a covenant with no one in particular and then leave it up to us to see who will end up being the other party to the covenant that He makes. God initiates the covenant and from the very beginning He actually makes that covenant *with* a specific people whom He has chosen and called according to His sovereign mercy and grace. If you think about

it, this is also something that has to be self-evident, and yet at the same time it's such an important and wonderful thing for us to meditate on. A covenant is never an open-ended affair. For a covenant to exist at all, the parties have to be named *personally* from the very beginning. So in Genesis 9, God named *Noah* and all *his* offspring after him as the one (or ones) with whom He was making a covenant (9:9). In Genesis 15 God named *Abraham* (15:18) and all of *his* offspring after him (cf. 17:7) as the one (or ones) with whom He was making a covenant. In Exodus 24 God named the whole "people" of *Israel* who were gathered at Mount Sinai (24:8) as those with whom He was making a covenant. And in 2 Samuel 7 God named *David* and *his* royal line as the one with whom He was making a covenant (7:9-16). God enters into covenant with those with whom He *chooses* to enter into covenant. There is much that can and must be said about God's love for the whole world, but that's simply not the same thing as God's "covenant love." It's in this light that we can rightly understand and embrace the mystery of what the Lord says in Malachi:

□ Malachi 1:2-3 — "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert."

We cannot rightly think about "covenant" unless we think about it first of all in terms of the sovereignty of God. And it's only against this backdrop of the sovereignty of God in the covenant that we can rejoice in the true beauty of Psalm 23.

We can't rightly understand the covenant, secondly, unless we think about it in terms of the shedding of **blood** and the application of that **blood** to all of those with whom God is sovereignly entering into covenant.

□ Hebrews 9:18-22 (cf. Exod. 24:4-8) — Not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you." And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

When it comes to the "old" and the "new" covenants, there can be no covenant without the shedding of blood, and there can be no covenant relationship unless that "blood of the covenant" has been "sprinkled" on us.

We cannot rightly understand the covenant unless we think about it in terms of the **sovereignty** of God and the shedding of **blood**. This helps us to appreciate more what we read in the Gospels:

□ Mark 14:24 (cf. Jer. 31:31) — [Jesus] said to [the disciples], "This is *my blood of the covenant*, which is poured out *for many*."

□ Luke 22:20 (cf. Heb. 9:15, 23-28) — "This cup that is poured out *for you* is the **new covenant** *in my blood*."

When we think rightly about the covenant, do you see how this takes away all the empty sentimentalism that's so often associated with Psalm 23? On the other hand, do you see how this opens up a whole new depth of meaning in this Psalm for those who truly *are* in covenant with God? Sadly, there are many who have drawn a comfort from Psalm 23 that's empty and deceitful, because apart from the context of covenant these words are all empty nothings – they're just warm and fuzzy sentiments; they're just happy thoughts that actually end up numbing us to the harsh realities of a life that's lived apart from God. But within the context of covenant and covenant relationship, these words express *so* beautifully, *so* profoundly, and *so* simply, what that relationship *is*.

II. **Psalm 23:1b** — The LORD is **my shepherd**...

In Ancient Near Eastern culture, the image of the shepherd is actually a royal image. The Babylonian King Hammurabi, who lived about the time of Abraham called himself a “shepherd” and the Babylonian god of justice, Shamash, was called “Shepherd of the lower world” (cf. VanGemeren). In the inspired Scriptures, which were composed in this Ancient Near Eastern context, the image of the shepherd is still a royal image.

- 2 Samuel 5:2 (cf. 2 Sam. 7:7) — The LORD said to [David], “You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.”
- Psalm 78:70–72 — [The LORD] chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand.

Of course, not all shepherds are kings, but the king in Israel was always to be a shepherd. And this was just a reflection of the reality that the God who is King over all the world is also the shepherd of His people – His flock. So the psalmist cries out in Psalm eighty:

- Psalm 80:1 — Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

Isn't it good to know that our King – the King over the whole world – is also our Shepherd? Isn't it good to know that when we think of our King, we think at the same time of our Shepherd – our “shepherd-King”? (cf. Keith and Kristyn Getty; “There Is a Higher Throne”)

In the verses we've looked at so far, we've seen the theme of the shepherd being used in the context of the “flock” or the whole “nation” of Israel (cf. Craigie). In fact, everywhere else in the Old Testament, that's how this theme is *always* used (cf. Ps. 77:20; 28:9). But we know that a flock is always made up of individual sheep and that the good shepherd cares not just for the “flock,” but also for each one of the sheep individually. The “flock” is rightly emphasized in Scripture because, of course, there's no such thing as a separate fold for every sheep, and also because all the sheep love to praise their shepherd-king and follow after Him together – as a flock.

- Psalm 79:13 — We your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise.
- Psalm 95:7 — [The LORD] is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.
- Psalm 100:3 — Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

And yet none of this emphasis on the “flock” ever undermines in any way the care of the shepherd individually for each one of the sheep in his flock. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is this reality expressed so clearly and so movingly as it is in Psalm 23. Only in Psalm 23 do we have on full display, and featured so clearly, just the *single* sheep and that sheep’s relationship to the shepherd. “The LORD is *my* shepherd.” As one who is in the bonds of covenant with God, do you think you’ve really yet fully comprehended how the Lord cares for *you* singly, individually, personally? Listen to the words of Jesus in John chapter ten:

- John 10:2–3 — He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name.

Can you truly say, as only one who is in covenant with God is able to say: “The LORD is my—*MY*—shepherd”?

In the Hebrew, the word for “shepherd” is actually not a noun, but a verbal participle that functions as a noun but still keeps its active and verbal force (cf. Ross). That’s just a fancy way of saying that “The LORD is my shepherd” means, essentially, “the LORD is the one who *shepherds* me – who is always, faithfully, *shepherding* me.”

Already, there is a wondrous peace and happiness and joy in these words. What an amazing thing it is to know God—within the covenant—as my shepherd – as the King who personally shepherds and cares for *me*! This is something worth meditating on, and something that we’re allowed to meditate on and even invited to meditate on for all our days.

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

If I know that the LORD is my shepherd, then I can also know that I will never, ever lack for anything that I need. I may lack the things that I “want” or even the things that I think I need, but I will never, ever lack for any of the things that the Lord knows I truly and really need – for any of those things that are necessary for my truest good. Do we believe that? Or perhaps the more important question is this: Do we rest in this? As we’ll see in the coming verses, whether I’m lying down in green pastures or walking through the valley of the shadow of death, in both circumstances—and, indeed, in all circumstances—I am able to say, “The LORD is my shepherd,” and *therefore* I’m also able to say at all times and in all circumstances, “I shall not want.” To put it the other way around, I’m able to say at all times and in all circumstances, “I shall not want,” only *because* it is true that “the LORD is,” at all times and in all circumstances, “my shepherd.”

Are you seeing how this Psalm not only comforts us, but also challenges us? It calls us to be able to confess with the psalmist by faith: “I shall not want.” I have never “lacked” in the past, and I know that I never will. Therefore, I am content. I am at rest.

IV. Psalm 23:1–3a — 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.**

The point, here, is not that the sheep spend their entire lives in green pastures and beside still waters. The point, here, is not that we live idyllic lives of never-ending comfort and ease. We know that’s not true. So instead, we think of the shepherd in Israel who would lead his flock through dry and parched lands from one source of water and pasture to another. The point is not that the LORD makes us lie down in green pastures once and for all and then leaves us to lie there throughout the rest of our lives, but rather that this is something He does for us repeatedly, at different times and in different ways, over and over again, throughout the course of our lives. That’s why the psalmist goes on to say immediately after this: “He *restores* [or *revives*] my soul” (lit. “He causes my soul to return”). So, the picture is that of having just spent a prolonged period of time in the heat of the middle-eastern sun, travelling through often rocky and difficult desert lands, and then finally coming to that oasis in the wilderness. I remember being in Israel and driving in an air-conditioned bus through the hot and parched desert until we came suddenly to what seemed like a living, glowing jewel of green. There was a stream there that spilled over a waterfall and collected in a pool before finding its way out again. And all around that pool there was, quite literally, the most lush and verdant green that I thought I’d ever seen. The point is not that the sheep stay in these places forever, but that these are the places to which the LORD is always ultimately bringing His sheep – so that He might cause them to lie down and rest in rich pasture, and drink from the “still waters” and be refreshed. Calvin says that the phrase “still waters” expresses “gently flowing waters, [because] rapid streams are inconvenient for sheep to drink in, and are also for the most part hurtful.” The point isn’t how dreamy “still waters” can be, but rather what is needful for the sheep. The point isn’t our idyllic, sentimental paintings, but rather what is needful for the sheep.

“He restores *my soul*.” This isn’t just a reference to the spiritual part of me as opposed to the physical. “My soul” is simply a way of referring to *me* – to all of me and my daily experience of living all of life. The shepherd knows when His sheep are weary and worn and He won’t ever let the sheep faint or fall along the way. Instead: “He restores my soul.” Always at those times when He knows I need it most, in some way or another, He is able to make me lie down in green pastures and lead me beside still waters. The shepherd knows what His sheep need, and what they need, he always provides at the proper time and in fullest measure. “*He restores my soul*.” We’re certainly not meant to “romanticize” the scene that’s painted here. I think we can easily avoid that as long as we’re not picturing the whole world turned into the garden of Eden, but rather scattered oases and places of refreshment in the midst of otherwise dry and barren lands.

Once again, do you see how these words are not only comforting us, but also challenging us? They call us to be able to confess with the psalmist not only as a matter of personal experience, but also by faith: “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores [He revives] my soul.” These are the things He does. He is a good and faithful shepherd.

But what about those times when we're in between the oases – when we're travelling, as it were, from one to the other? Sometimes these journeys may be relatively easy, and sometimes they may be more challenging and tiresome. The terrain may be at various times more or less difficult. But in any case, the in between times are never the times of lying down in green pastures and drinking from the still waters. So, is the shepherd still to be trusted and followed even in these times? The psalmist answers:

V. Psalm 23:3b — He leads me in [the] right paths for his name's sake.

The King James, the ESV, and the NASB all translate “paths of righteousness,” but I think this translation (cf. NIV; NRSV; HCSB; NET; NCV; NLT)—“He leads me in the right paths,” or “He leads me along the right paths”—is better because it helps us to keep thinking in terms of the middle-eastern shepherd and his sheep. I think it fits the context better.

What makes these paths the “right” paths? They never end at the edge of a precipice, or at a raging torrent of water, or in a ditch too deep or too steep to climb up out of, or at the edge of an impassable desert. In other words, the right paths never lead to a dead end, or to some final disaster. Instead, they always lead surely and truly—eventually—to the green pastures and the still waters which the shepherd knows that His sheep need. That's why they're always the “right” paths even if, at times, they may be difficult, and tiring, and rocky, and parched. That's why we can always trustingly, confidently follow our shepherd no matter what each path holds on the way. It's this “*following*” the shepherd on every path and in the midst of every circumstance that's actually our “righteousness.” It's in this sense that Psalm 23 also assumes we're walking in paths of righteousness.

“He leads me in the right paths,” says the psalmist, “for His name's sake.” His “name,” we know, is Yahweh – His covenant name. So why does God always, faithfully lead us in the “right” paths – the paths that lead safely to the desired destination? It's because of the covenant that He has made with us and because He would always be proven faithful to His covenant. It's not just our good and our welfare that's at stake here; it's actually the reputation and the honor of God's own holy and awesome name.

And so we see again how this Psalm not only comforts us, but also *challenges* us to be able to pray these words by faith: “He leads me in the right paths for His name's sake.” I know this to be true, and so I can always trustingly, confidently—in full obedience and submission—*follow* my shepherd. Really? *Always*? The psalmist goes on in verse four:

VI. Psalm 23:4 — 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.

The “right paths” in which our shepherd leads us may even be paths that pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Do we really comprehend that? Are we able to confess by faith that even these paths that pass through the valley of the shadow of death are still the “right” paths and

therefore they are never, under any circumstances, to be abandoned for any other paths, no matter how “easy” they may be?

“Shadow of death” is actually a single word in the Hebrew, and so we get “shadow of death” by dividing this single word into two separate words. But maybe a better way to give a sense of the meaning of this single word would be to translate, “the valley of *death-shade*,” or “the valley of *deathly shadow*.” In other words, this isn’t just about literal “death” and dying (this isn’t just a Psalm for funerals!); this is about a valley that’s deathly dark (cf. Job 3:5; 10:21–22; 24:17; 38:17; Jer. 2:6). That’s why many translations say, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley” (cf. NIV; NRSV; HCSB; NET; NCV; NLT). One commentator describes what the psalmist has in mind here:

The hill country of Judah is broken up by narrow and precipitous ravines, or wadis, difficult to descend and ascend, dark, [and] gloomy [because they’re cut off from the light by the steep sides of the ravines], and abounding in caves, the abode of wild beasts and robbers. (Briggs; quoted in Ross)

This is no gentle and lush river “valley,” but rather a deep and treacherous ravine. So what, then, is the “darkest valley” for us? At some point it may be literal death (that’s not excluded here), but more generally, it’s whatever circumstances may cause us at any time to be the most afraid and the most fearful. There may be the more “sinister” threats and dangers from “outside,” or there may be the more innocent but no less terrible threat of simply losing our way and being left alone, to fend for ourselves. But in either case, the psalmist is firm – settled in his faith: “I will fear no evil [no danger of *any kind*].” Why? “For You are with me.”

“For *You are with me*.” Those are some of the most wonderful, beautiful words in all of Scripture. Can we pray those words by faith even when we’re in the deepest, darkest valley? What we have here is yet another reminder that this is a prayer of the one *in covenant* with God. In Exodus, when God revealed Himself to His people by His covenant name (Yahweh; “I was, I am, I will be”), He did this *against the backdrop* of His promise to Moses, “I will be— *with you*” (Exod. 3:11-15). And so *as* those who are in covenant with God—as those who have been chosen by God and who have had the blood of the covenant applied to us and who know His name, we love to say—we delight to say—at all times and in all circumstances: “for You are with me!” He is with me to protect me and to guard me from all the dangers that lurk with His “rod” (Exod. 21:20; Micah 5:1; Prov. 22:15; 29:15; Isa. 28:27) and also to guide me and to keep me in the right path with His “staff.” And so the psalmist says, “Your *rod* and your *staff*, they comfort me.” It’s not actually the “rod” or the “staff” in and of itself that comforts the sheep, is it? It’s the fact that it’s “*Your rod*” and “*Your staff*.” The “rod” and the “staff” comfort the sheep only in so far as these things *stand for* the protecting, guiding presence of the shepherd (metonymy). To say “Your *rod* and Your *staff*, they comfort me,” is just another way of saying, “for *You are with me* – *You comfort me*.”

Conclusion

What we have here in these verses is a prayer that truly does encapsulate the nature of that relationship that exists between the covenant God and His covenant child – not just His covenant people, but His covenant child. This is a relationship that’s pictured for us in terms of a shepherd and his sheep – of a shepherd who calls each one of His sheep by name and cares for each one of His sheep individually. It’s a picture on the one hand of the most tender care, and on the other hand of the most implicit trust. The shepherd leads and the sheep follow. And so as we’ve seen over and over again already this morning, this psalm is not just a psalm of comfort – though it is that! It’s also a psalm that I’m challenged to pray and to sing by faith, as the expression of my implicit trust in the shepherd. It’s as I pray and sing this psalm by faith, as one who is in covenant with God, that I can then enter into all of the true **comforts** and **delights** that are here to be enjoyed.

- Psalm 23:1–4 (cf. John 10:2–4, 14–15, 27–29) — 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 the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.