

R.C., Suffering, & Psa. 23

Toward the end of his life, RC Sproul was asked about suffering. He had taught many times on the topic. Toward the end of his life, he experienced a lot of physical suffering and the question was turned on him. He was asked how he personally applied the things he had taught for years about suffering. One of the things he said was that he meditated on Psalm 23 every day.

Psalm 23 Is The Greatest Of Psalms

Psalm 23 is the greatest Psalm ever. “**Greatest**” in terms of the extent to which people seek refuge in it. Whether it’s the **soldier** in the foxhole, the **prisoner** in the POW camp, the **parents** who have lost a child, the **spouse** that has lost his/her wife/husband, the **patient** battling cancer, the **family** that has lost everything!

The Most Well-Known Psalm

What we have in Psalm 23 is the most well-known Psalm ever written. PSA 23 is the JOHN 3:16 of the OT. It’s on **pictures**, get-well **cards**, coffee **mugs**, **candle** labels, **Bible covers**, **church marquees**, **calendars**...

Lost Our Need For It?

There’s a sense in which we’ve been inundated with PSALM 23. It has been reduced to marketing fodder. For some people it’s been over-played or worn-out. They’ve heard PSALM 23 enough to be content with it. They certainly don’t need to hear another sermon on it! Sadly, familiarity has bred contempt.

This Must Not Be!!!

BL—we cannot get enough of Psalm 23! It cannot be exhausted. It contains such rich truths about God. You find these truths hinted at other places in the Psalms, but Psalm 23 paints them in full living color. It’s been a bulwark for believers for millennia. If Psalms is a castle, Psalm 23 is the stronghold at the center!

Written By King David

He was the greatest of Israel’s kings & his relationship to God uniquely qualified him to write this Psalm. He is the “**man after God’s own heart.**” So the Psalm is not written by a person who is distant from God. It’s written by someone who knew what it was to be intimate with God.

He Was A Shepherd

What also makes David qualified to pen this Psalm is the fact that he was a shepherd. He knew of the tender **loving care, vigilance, and intimate discipline** the shepherd had to have for the sheep.

No Inscription

Many things make Psalm 23 unique. One of those things is that it has no inscription giving the background. This makes the application of the psalm to our lives as broad as it can be. (**ILLUST: Gideon’s “read when”**)

No Requests

Something else that makes this psalm unique is that there are no requests made. Many of the Psalms are filled with supplication to God, but that’s not the case here.

David’s Summary Statement

David begins this Psalm with a summary statement in verse one...probably the most famous phrases of all. People have memorized many phrases from the Psalms, perhaps NONE is more comforting than this one.

EVERY WORD IS IMPORTANT!!! (Illustration from English & meditation)

“**The Lord**” - This is Yahweh. The covenant name of the self-existent, eternal God.

“**Is**” - There is a present tense, active nature to this. The Lord is always, actively shepherding.

“**My**” - Expresses the personal nature of the relationship. The Lord is not just Israel’s shepherd.

“**Shepherd**” - This is the metaphor David chooses to use for God. A whole sermon shepherding metaphor. God is often portrayed as a shepherd. Shepherds were the outcasts of society: uneducated and despised. They were the lowly of society. David was his father’s shepherd because he was the youngest of his brothers.

A Two-Part Statement

This summary statement has two parts and flows from the other. “**Because the Lord is my shepherd...**” Because it’s the Lord who cares for me, “**I shall not want.**” I will never feel as if I’m missing something. The Lord is enough. I’ll never be deprived or underprivileged. I’ll never lack any good thing. **I am content.**

CIT - So, as David writes the rest of this Psalm, he describes his relationship to God in the sheep-shepherd metaphor. Two reasons: (1) because it best describes God’s care for us, and (2) because it best describes how we relate to Him.

SI - As we go through this passage I hope that we’ll learn something of God’s tender loving care for His own.

OUT - I’ve divided it into three parts: **1. His Peace** (v. 2-3), **2. His Protection** (v. 4), **3. His Provision** (v. 5-6).

TRANS - Let’s make our way through this Psalm. As we do, I want to focus in on key phrases David uses.

1. If The Lord Is Your Shepherd, You Will Know HIS PEACE (V. 2-3)

“Green Pastures” (v. 2a)

The first phrase David makes to describe God’s peace is, “**He makes me lie down in green pastures.**” Most of the land of Israel was desert wasteland and shepherds wandered the countryside to find pastures. David describes God’s care as always finding the “**green**” pastures, the best pastures. (Sheep hit their mouths)

No Wandering - “Lying Down” (v. 2a)

Instead of wandering, David describes his experience as “**lying down**” in green pastures. Those sheep who are closest to Him find those pastures and “**lie down**” in them, they stay in them. They can eat their full, lie down, and later rise to eat more, which was unheard of in Israel.

He “MAKES” Me Lie Down

Notice it says “**He makes me.**” This describes God’s care over His sheep. Sheep were afraid to lie down. Q: Why are pastures green? A: Because of rain, which soaked their coats, preventing them from getting up. The shepherd would have to “**make**” the sheep lie down.

“Quiet Waters” (v. 2b)

Along with the provision of food are the “**quiet waters.**” God “**leads**” His sheep beside these waters. Sheep are extremely skittish animals with a keen sense of hearing (**ILLUST**: Shepherd calling his sheep). They cannot drink from running streams because they fear the commotion and noise of them. A shepherd had to find places in the stream where the water pooled so the sheep could be at peace and drink.

Restoration of Soul (v. 3a)

Another way David describes the peace he has because the Lord is his shepherd is a “**restoration of soul.**” “**Restore**” describes a “**turning back**” or “**bringing back**” from straying. This is sweet shepherding imagery. Our hearts are prone to wander. Being the shepherd He is, God faithfully “**draws us back to Himself.**”

Lacking Internal GPS

If there was ever an animal that lacked an internal GPS, it's sheep. They get off of the path so easily. If we belong to Him, we have the peace of knowing that we will never be lost. We will never stray too long. And if we stray, He will seek us (**ILLUST**: Shepherd counting sheep in evening).

Guiding in Righteousness (v. 3b)

God not only draws us back to Himself when we start to wander, but He **"guides"** us in His paths. A good shepherd does not **"drive"** the sheep like cattle, he **"guides"** and **"leads"** the sheep. God **"guides"** us in **"paths of righteousness."** He leads us in His ways; in righteous ways. This is the difference between a true shepherd and a hired hand. Hired hands don't care like the shepherd.

For His Name's Sake (v. 3c)

Q: Why does the Lord do this? **A:** **"For His name's sake."** God has a vested interest in His sheep. We are His sheep. He doesn't guide us like a hired hand. He guides us as if we are His...and we are! He is the owner of His sheep. When His sheep hurt, He hurts. When His sheep are taken care of, He feels it. When His sheep walk in righteousness, His name is magnified.

TRANSITION

This is the peace experienced by the sheep that belong to the loving shepherd. They do not want, they lie down in green pastures, they are led beside the quiet waters, they are continually restored, they are guided in righteousness. Not only does He provide peace, He provides protection of them...

2. If The Lord Is Your Shepherd, You Will Know HIS PROTECTION (V. 4)

David Takes a Turn

Notice the turn David takes. Just because the Lord is his shepherd doesn't mean he never experiences trials. He goes from the pastures and watering holes to the valley. Also notice as he makes this turn, he changes pronouns from **"He," "He," "He,"** to **"You," "You," "You."** As things get dangerous, the relationship gets more intimate. He now directs his prayer to God, his Shepherd.

The "Valley"

David describes times where he **"walks through the valley."** This is terminology we use regularly today. We often refer to tough times in our lives as **"valleys"**. They are those times that we find to be unpleasant. The word used here describes a deep gorge, bracketed by steep, treacherous walls. It's a tight, straight place.

The Sheep Go Through

You can picture in your mind a shepherd having to lead his sheep from one area of the countryside to another. In some cases, the only way to get from one side to the other was to traverse these deep, narrow gorges. You can picture the sheep going through this gorge and it slowly closes in and the sheep are pressed together. They feel the cliff walls towering over them as if they'll fall & crush them (**ILLUST: CLIMBING MTNS**).

Flash Flood Warning

These valleys were also particularly dangerous because of flash floods. Shepherds can take the sheep into some of these canyons and get caught in an unexpected rain. It doesn't take long for all of that rain to funnel into these valleys & create a raging river to sweep them away.

"Shadow of Death"

David adds to this metaphor by referring to it as a valley “**of the shadow of death.**”

This is all one word in Hebrew. It’s used 18x in the OT. More than half of those are in the book of JOB.

It’s a place of “**blackness**”, “**thick gloom**”, “**darkness**”, “**haunting shadows**”, “**abandonment from God**”.

Sheep are already skittish animals, so you can imagine what a place like this would do to a sheep.

A Picture Of Our Trials

Isn’t this a clear picture of the trials we often go through?

God sometimes intends us to go from one stage of life to the next. In order to do so, we go through the valley.

These can be times of emotional, physical, or spiritual distress. Times when we feel like God is distant.

Times of trial are often times when we feel lost in the shadows, invisible to the shepherd.

EVERY WORD IS IMPORTANT!!!

“**Even though**” - Acknowledges the reality that there will be times of going through the valley.

“**Walk**” - We do not “run” as if scared. We do not “freeze” as if petrified. We calmly “walk”.

“**Through**” - This emphasizes that we’ll get through it. We don’t “**stay in**” the valley.

“I Fear No Evil”

In other words, “**The shepherd may lead me through the valleys, but I KNOW I will not be harmed.**”

Notice that THERE WILL BE EVIL. The word “**evil**” here describes something “**bad**” or “**harmful**”.

Sheep are often exposed to things that will harm them and they’re too ignorant/unaware to keep safe.

It’s the shepherd’s job to keep close watch over the sheep and make sure they stay away from these dangers.

ILLUST: **450 sheep over a cliff.**

SPURGEON & The “Shadow”

I love the way Spurgeon urges us not to fear the shadow of death in his Treasury of David: “**Nobody is afraid of a shadow, for a shadow cannot stop a man’s pathway even for a moment. The shadow of a dog cannot bite; the shadow of a sword cannot kill; the shadow of death cannot destroy us. Let us not, therefore, be afraid.**”

He goes on to describe Christ’s victory of not just the shadow of death, but death itself!

If we belong to Christ, we need not fear even the worst of fears: death.

“You Are With Me”

Q: What is it about the shepherd that comforts David? **A:** Knowing that “**YOU ARE WITH ME**”.

David is comforted by the fact that the shepherd is always with him.

In the green pastures, by the still waters, through the deep/dark valleys, the shepherd is with him.

How much truer is this of the NT believer! “**Lo I am with you.**”

“Your Rod & Your Staff”

Not only is it the shepherd’s presence, David mentions the comfort he receives from His “**rod and staff**”.

This phrase highlights two aspects of the shepherd’s care:

(1) Rod - Discipline/Correction

The shepherd’s “**rod**” was used to inflict blows to the sheep to keep them away from where they shouldn’t be.

It was used for discipline and sometimes for breaking of bones (Christ had no broken bones for disobedience).

(2) Staff - Care/Guidance/Protection

The “**staff**” is what you and I think of when we think of a shepherd’s staff. It’s different from “**the rod**”.

He wouldn't use the "staff" to discipline because he wanted to use it in situations to convey care/protection. This is similar to disciplining our children and using a separate utensil when disciplining your children.

"They Comfort Me"

This is where David finds his comfort from the shepherd. It's not just the green pastures & still waters. This is what truly conveys to him his shepherd's love and care.

The Lord loves David. What most reaffirms this is His correction, discipline, and protection.

Negative Aspects Of Psalm 23

Before we transition to the next point, just consider the negative aspects of this Psalm.

Psalm 23 is greatly comforting, but the reason it's so comforting is because of its honesty.

It assures us we'll go through the valleys, we'll die, we'll have enemies. But thru it all, the Shepherd guides!

TRANSITION

This is the protection that the Lord offers to those whom He shepherds. Those of us who belong to Him can rest in His protection. **PROV 3:11-12 - "My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord or loath His reproof. For whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights."**

What a comfort to us, particularly during times when we have to go through the valley!

In addition to the Lord's **PEACE** and **PROTECTION**, David exalts God for His **PROVISION** (v. 5-6).

3. If The Lord Is Your Shepherd, You Will Know HIS PROVIDENCE (V. 5-6)

"You Prepare A Table" (v. 5)

In ancient times, to be invited to someone's table was to be invited into close friendship.

To sit at the table and enjoy a meal was one of the closest expressions of friendship.

To be invited to sit at the king's table was very rare and honoring; reserved for only a few.

Here, it's not just the Lord inviting David, but "**preparing the table**" specifically for David to enjoy.

"In The Presence Of Enemies" (v. 5)

Imagine if you were surrounded by enemies that wanted to kill you. (**ILLUST**: a soldier doesn't sit and dine)

This describes the Lord's work in elevating David over his enemies: **PROV 16:7 - "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him."**

It describes a sheep being able to eat freely without fear of wolves, bears, lions, or other predators.

We WILL Have Enemies

Again, notice the honesty here. Just because the Lord is our Shepherd doesn't mean we won't have enemies!

In fact, because the Lord is our Shepherd, we will have enemies we otherwise wouldn't.

Consider the church. She is in the midst of her enemies (the world, the devil). This is enemy territory!

"You Have Anointed My Head" (v. 5)

The act of anointing in scripture had many purposes: physical/spiritual healing, consecration (setting apart priests, prophets, kings), and it was done as an expression of joy/blessing.

David is expressing how much the Lord's hand of blessing has been upon him.

Used Medicinally For Sheep

Lanolin in the sheep's coat attracted bugs. The shepherd would anoint the sheep's head to keep them away.

“My Cup” (v. 5)

This amplifies what David has just expressed about the Lord’s goodness to him.

“**My cup**” refers to his lot, his life, or the totality of who he is and what he has in the Lord.

It figuratively describes what has been providentially given to us in life.

In modern terms we would say, “**The hand we’ve been dealt in life.**”

“It Overflows” (v. 5)

Notice what David says about “**the cup**” that’s been given to him - “**It overflows**” or “**it runs over**”.

In other words, God’s providence has been abundantly good. The “**hand he’s been dealt is a Royal Flush.**”

David couldn’t ask for more. He’s been given more than he deserves. His shepherd has provided abundantly.

“SURELY!” (v. 6)

Verse 6 is David’s final assessment of his life and his shepherd. “**Surely**” is an affirmation of certainty.

He knows what he is about to say is absolutely true. He can bank on it because of his shepherd’s care.

Past realities guarantee future providence. He makes two statements to describe his future **in life and death**:

“Goodness & Lovingkindness” In This Life (v. 6a)

David is first confident about his future IN LIFE. He looks forward to “**goodness**”.

This is a generic word that describes things that are “**good**”, “**pleasant**”, and “**right**”.

David knows that his shepherd is good and that he will provide him with good things.

He also looks forward to “**lovingkindness**” (*hesed*).

This is a confession. David knows that the Lord will be merciful to him when he wanders off path.

No matter what David does, he knows that the Lord will remain faithful, compassionate, and kind.

They Will “Follow Me” (v. 6)

Notice how David states this. The words “**follow me**” are often used in a negative sense.

They describe an enemy pursuing/overtaking. They describe wolves in pursuit of the sheep to kill/eat them. He uses this analogy to describe God’s goodness and mercy. “**They pursue me**” / “**They overtake me**”

God’s goodness/mercy hunt me down. They track me and find me every day and will for the rest of my life.

Blessedness In The Next Life (v. 6b)

In this last phrase, David looks to eternity. The Lord will shepherd me not just in this life, but thru the next.

“**I will dwell in the house of the Lord.**” “**Dwell**” describes sitting, remaining, and settling down somewhere.

It describes making somewhere your new, permanent abode. “**House**” - the place of permanent abode.

Here David is referring to the permanent abode of the Lord Himself. He will dwell in the place God dwells!

“Forever” = No More Wandering

All of David’s life (all of our life) could be described as wandering. Like sheep, we wander through this life.

One day we will be led home to dwell with the Shepherd eternally.

When we leave this life, we will go somewhere to dwell “**forever**”. Once we die, we will be there “**forever**”.

CONCLUSION

The Lord Is David’s Shepherd

I want to conclude where this Psalm began. David asserted in V. 1 - “**The LORD is my shepherd.**”

The rest of the Psalm is true because that is true. If the Lord wasn’t David’s shepherd, he couldn’t say this.

This Psalm Is Not For Everyone!

Not everyone can claim the truths David is claiming. Not everyone can say, “**The Lord is my shepherd.**” This Psalm is the most well-known Psalm, but it’s also the **MOST ABUSED** Psalm.

People look to this Psalm for comfort, but they have no right to because the Lord is not their shepherd! They get assurance, but it’s a false assurance. They want God as Shepherd, but not Master/Savior/Lord!

You Must Know The Good Shepherd

The only way you can claim the promises of this Psalm is if you know the Good Shepherd: **JOHN 10 - “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I am the good shepherd, and I know my own and my own know me, even as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep...For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on my own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from my Father.”**

He Alone Laid Down His Life

What is Jesus talking about here?...this “**laying down of his life**” and “**taking it up again**”?

He’s talking about exactly that. He willingly laid down His life for His sheep and was raised from the dead.

ISA 53:5-6 - “He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”

We Have All Wandered

All of us like sheep have wandered from God. God made man upright, but he has searched out many devices. There is none of us who does good. We do not deserve these blessings in Psalm 23; we deserve to be cursed. BUT, God has chosen to strike the shepherd on behalf of the sheep! He loved us and sent His Son to die. The shepherd has stood in the place of the sheep, offering up His own life for our sake.

God Calls Us To The Shepherd

Now God calls all of us to turn to this great shepherd of our souls.

He calls us to turn from paths of wickedness and turn to Christ to walk in righteousness for His name’s sake.

He alone is the shepherd who can lead us through this life and into His eternal kingdom.

THEN We Can Say This

If we do this, then we will truly know what it means to say, “**The Lord is MY shepherd.**”

We’ll know what it’s like to have communion with the shepherd.

We’ll know green pastures, still waters, and what it’s like to have our souls restored and renewed.

We may walk through valleys of death, but the Lord’s rod and staff will guide us and comfort us.

His goodness and mercy will follow us all our days. And we will dwell in His house forever.