



good shepherd  
presbyterian church

## **The Lord is My Shepherd**

Psalm 23

Sermon by: Clare Mackie

July 19, 2020

---

I have always been a vivid dreamer. Even to this day, I can usually recall events from the previous night's dreams with great detail. As the days and years have passed, I have forgotten most of my dreams, but two dreams, well nightmares, have stuck with me throughout my life – one where I am chased through a dark town by a mob of pirates and one where I watch my parents drive away, leaving me stranded at a dark, abandoned castle. The commonalities here? Complete darkness and a sense of pure loneliness.

Although these dreams were far from realistic (as in the only encounter I've ever had with pirates was from watching too much *Pirates of the Caribbean* and my parents would never leave me stranded), I remember waking up with a sense of pure terror, as if I had experienced the traumatizing events firsthand. Whenever I awakened from these nightmares, sweating and sometimes crying, my initial reaction was to call out to my parents. They'd immediately come to my rescue and ensure me it was only a nightmare. I'd ask them to stay a while and they never hesitated to crawl into bed and wrap me in their arms until I fell asleep again. There is truly nothing that compares to the feeling of pure safety that comes with resting in the arms of a parent or guardian in a time of fear. Although I couldn't escape the anxiety of falling back into those nightmares, the presence of a parent was enough to provide comfort in the darkness.

David talks about feelings of comfort in times of apparent darkness in his 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. In this particular psalm, David declares our Lord a Good Shepherd who promises to guide and protect us, no matter the circumstances. In order to understand the power of this psalm fully, it is important to first understand the writer and the roles David held during his lifetime.

David was king, but before that, he was a shepherd. During this time in history, assuming the role of shepherd was considered a lowly job. The role was often given to the youngest son in any given household and received little acknowledgement or appreciation by those outside the profession. It was not a role that was typically sought out by those engaging with it, but one that was assigned to them. That being said, the metaphor David invites us to consider (the Lord as our Shepherd) was precious in the eyes of first believers. For Jesus to be compared to a shepherd was to acknowledge his own humanness and to willingly assume the lowest of low jobs. This is just one illustration of the many ways Jesus seemed to “stoop to our level” during his time on Earth.

Later in life, however, David was crowned king, and a very popular one at that. David transitioned from one of the lowliest jobs to a position of high honor over the course of his lifetime. David uses both his experience as a Shepherd and his experience as a king to describe the loving, sacrificial, and giving nature of our Lord God and Savior and provide further insight into Jesus’ promise to protect us in times of darkness.

God’s first promise to comfort us in the darkness appears in the first verse - “I shall not want.” The phrase speaks to our need to depend on the Lord, even when times are good. “He makes me lie down in green pastures” can be interpreted as, “I shall not grow weary. The Lord makes me rest, He even requires it of me, and His strength will sustain me.” “He leads me beside still waters” can be interpreted as “I shall not thirst, for the waters quench my soul.” And David finishes with “He restores my soul,” a powerful statement that acknowledges our own humanness by speaking to a power only God possesses. Nothing on Earth can satisfy our souls. Although we can avoid weariness by getting a few extra hours of sleep, or quench our thirst with a nice cold glass of water, only the Lord can truly satisfy our souls. There exists a space in our hearts which only God can fill, and it is here in David’s psalm that the Lord promises to fill that void. How glorious a promise He has made!

It is also important to acknowledge the meaning of the word “shall” within this context. Although current culture defines “shall” as a command, this is not David’s intention in including the word in this particular psalm. Instead, the word “shall” is used in the future tense to suggest that God will provide. We are not promised that we will never grow weary or thirsty from an earthly perspective, but we are promised that God will sustain us and ultimately satisfy our souls with His love and care.

David’s personal experience with God, as demonstrated by the change in pronoun, and his shift to kingly imagery speak to the love and care demonstrated by our Savior, Jesus

Christ. David starts to get personal with God when the pronouns used to describe God shift from “He” to “You.” Until this point, David has referred to God in the third person, as if talking about God from a general perspective. After the shift, which happens at the same time David describes his time in the “valley of the shadow of death,” David references God in the second person point of view in order to highlight the more personal relationship David has experienced with God while in the darkness.

Verse 4 marks the transition from third person to second person, but also highlights a change in scenery. Up until verse 4, David uses peaceful imagery, talking about green pastures and still waters, but it is here in verse 4 that he references the “valley of the shadow of death.” We’ve all heard people talk about valleys as a metaphor for describing low times in life, but this valley David writes about seems different, darker, and more intimidating. And although the imagery is dark, David assures us there is no reason to fear, even stating “I will fear no evil for You are with me.” There are three reasons why David tells us not to fear in the valley:

First, the valley is not a valley of death, but a valley of the *shadow* of death. Shadows have no power. Although they can invoke fear by suggesting something dangerous is near, shadows themselves cannot harm or destroy. By including this detail, David tells us we have no reason to fear because there is nothing that can actually harm us in the valley.

Second, the Lord promises to both guide and protect us in the valley. David writes, “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” A shepherd used his tools to protect from predators (rod) and guide (staff) his sheep. Used alone, the tools failed to fully comfort the sheep, but used together they had incredible power to guide and support. We can find comfort in the Lord’s promise to guide *and* protect us, fully knowing the shadows of death have no power.

In verse 5, David shifts from shepherd imagery to kingly imagery, paralleling his own shift in occupation. Here, David presents two metaphors from the perspective of a king: preparing a table and anointing with oil. Here, there exists much overlap between God’s giving nature and the act of preparing a table for house guests. For one, the word “prepare” seems to suggest thoughtfulness, or foresight and care. The Lord has already prepared for our arrival in Heaven, and He is so excited to have us there with Him. Secondly, the table of a king included a wide spread of treats. To say that the Lord prepares a table for us means He provides in abundance; He allows us to “treat ourselves” and provides for our every need. And finally, David says the Lord prepares a table “before him,” suggesting a personal connection with the Lord. The Lord welcomes

us individually into His house with open arms, treating each of us like the most revered guest at the party.

Oil, on the other hand, was used to indicate honor. Kings anointed their guests with oil to show care or consideration. Shepherds lathered their sheep with oil to protect them from parasites. Oil heals, softens, and soothes. In the same way, the Lord anoints us with oil to demonstrate His love for us and His desire to protect and care for us individually.

In this psalm, the sheep enter the shadow of death not because they have sinned and wandered from their shepherd, but because the shepherd actually leads them there. This doesn't mean we will never wander from the Lord, but in this particular psalm, we are invited to consider what it means to actually be led there. The Lord often leads us through valleys so that we have the chance to draw closer to Him. Psalm 23 illustrates this concept beautifully. God promises to lead us along paths of righteousness. Therefore, if He is leading us through the valley of the shadow of death, surely it is to get us to a better place.

So, what? What does all this mean for us today? To be led by a shepherd, and a very good one at that, we must first acknowledge our place as sheep – wholly dependent on the Lord to lead us through both the green pastures and the valleys. The Shepherd is inviting you to be led, and He promises to protect you along the way. Today, I invite you to receive the gifts of care and guidance from the Lord and rest assured knowing you are never alone in dark and unfamiliar places. He's got you, and He will never leave you alone in the dark. Amen.