

The Lord is My Shepherd

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Preacher: Rev. David Taylor

[0 : 00] I'm excited to introduce our preacher this morning. Some of you already know him. His name is Dr. David O. Taylor. He is the Assistant Professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary.

He's also an ordained Anglican minister, and he's also a friend of ours. He's recently done an event for us looking at his most recent book, *Open and Unafraid*, which is a book on the Psalms.

And when I knew we would be looking at the Psalms this summer, I knew we had to reach out to David Taylor and see if he would be willing to preach for us. And he agreed, so I'm very excited to have him with us this morning. This is Dr. David Taylor.

All right, good morning, friends. My name is David Taylor. I'm so pleased to be with you. I know that we're separated, as always, by geography. I am here in Austin, Texas.

You are in Virginia. But by God's grace, the Holy Spirit can and does wish to bind us together in ways that defy our capacity to ask or even imagine.

[1 : 06] So that's what I'm praying for this morning, that we will feel our kinship together in some tangible and perhaps even miraculous ways. A heartfelt thanks to Tommy and the staff for kindly inviting me and trusting me to you and you to me.

It's a gift, so thank you. My text for today is Psalm 23, and I'd like to read it and then offer some comments on it.

So allow me to read our text for today. I'm going to read it in the King James, which maybe some of you read it in the King James on a regular basis. Maybe some of you haven't read the Bible in the King James, but perhaps it might fall in a fresh way upon our listening ears and heart.

Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul.

He leadeth me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

[2 : 20] Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.

It was in the beginning, now is, and forever shall be. Amen. Amen. Okay, my text today, obviously, is Psalm 23. Preaching on Psalm 23 is a little bit like being asked to preach on *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*.

What could I possibly say that was new or fresh or insightful about a song that has been read and prayed and sung, perhaps more than any psalm, and let's just be honest, in American history.

Because it is not actually one of the beloved psalms of church history. Okay, so I'm fighting here against an awful sense of familiarity.

[3 : 30] Perhaps we're dealing with images that are evoked in our minds from Sunday school lessons where we might have seen this image.

Now, this very famous painting by Warner Solomon of *The Lord is My Shepherd*, with its vision of little plump sheep and utopian pastures devoid of any hint of death valleys, and hovering over this idyllic landscape.

There is this well-groomed Caucasian Jesus emanating an unflappable emollient aura. Well, that is, perhaps for some of us, the image that immediately comes to mind when we think Psalm 23.

It is, for what it's worth, an image that is a thousand miles removed from the idea of shepherd in this particular psalm, throughout the Psalms, throughout the Old Testament, and certainly throughout the Gospels.

Nonetheless, these are realities that we face when we come to the text. So then, what do you say to a people for whom Psalm 23 may simply be an awful lot of white noise?

[4 : 41] Well, you tell them this, that verse 1, in fact, represents the Gospel, and that it identifies our fundamental need as human beings and our fundamental fear as human beings.

So, if you don't remember anything that I say this morning, remember this. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. That phrase, that statement, identifies your fundamental need and, conversely, your fundamental fear that the Lord will, in fact, not be your shepherd, and that you will always find yourself in want, perhaps in very specific places in your life that you have not experienced the Lord's shepherding care.

So, before I offer some comments on this one verse, allow me to offer a few comments, brief comments on the larger context. As my New Testament professor in seminary, Gordon Fee, used to tell us often, context, context, context is everything.

So, first thing to say is that there is this fantastic dialogue that is taking place between Psalm 22, Psalm 23, and Psalm 24. In Psalm 22, for example, the psalmist is this utterly needy individual who experiences being utterly forsaken by God.

In Psalm 24, on the other hand, God appears as this divine warrior king who owns everything, wants for nothing, and generously provides for all creatures.

[6 : 17] In between is Psalm 23. And the psalmist individual functions as a kind of representative figure who wants for nothing, but surrounding him on every side stand death and enemies, realities that we are all familiar with these days.

A second thing to point out is this. While we may be tempted to read Psalm 23 as the story of this self-contained individual serenely moving through life, the editors of the Psalter will, in fact, not allow us to read the text this way, in a peculiarly American way, if I may say so.

They sandwich Psalm 23 between Psalm 22 and 24 in order to remind us that we simply cannot do life alone. We are in this fundamental need for others, which we experience rather acutely these days.

A final thing to note is that there are three movements in Psalm 23 that correspond to three key metaphors that open up the meaning of the psalm for us. In verses 1 to 3, the Lord appears as a shepherd and the psalmist as a sheep.

In verses 4 and 5, the Lord appears as a host and the psalmist as a guest. And in the final verse, the psalmist is at home in the house of the Lord.

[7 : 41] It is in this way, I suggest to you, that the psalmist represents for us a journey from a traveler out in the world to a family member who has finally arrived home.

It's in this sense, I suggest to you again, that Psalm 23 is the story of Adam and Eve. It's also the story of Israel. It's the story of the early church.

And in fact, it's your story and my story. Travelers out in the world facing all kinds of difficult and demanding experiences in life, things that try us to our core, like death and enemies, with this deep hunger to arrive someday at home.

Okay, a few brief comments about the larger context. With that in mind, let's take a look at Psalm 23, verse 1. The first word that appears in this text, as you all know, is the Lord.

Why is that significant? Well, in the Hebrew, this is the sacred four consonant name that God reveals to Moses, what you and I sometimes read in our translations as Yahweh.

[8 : 54] This is the very personal name of God. This is God's forever name. He is the, I am with you, near you, God. He is the, I see you, God.

There's nothing generic about this name. It's the difference between saying, I'm a man, and saying, I'm the son of Bill and Yvonne Taylor. I'm the husband of Phaedra.

I'm the father of Blythe and Sebastian. It's the difference between, I see all of you, and you don't know me rather well, and so my seeing is rather generic.

In fact, I can't really see you, but if I were in the same room with you in the flesh, which would be fantastic, I would say, I see you. But when I say to my wife, I see you, it's a different kind of seeing. That's the kind of seeing that is expressed in this name, Yahweh. The Lord is the first thing that we encounter. The second thing we encounter is my shepherd.

[9 : 53] The Lord is my shepherd. Why is this important? Well, for one, you can't actually be a good shepherd at a distance. You have to be a near-at-hand, quite literally at-hand's-length caretaker.

A faraway shepherd is fundamentally a contradiction in terms. Now, a second thing to point out is that in ancient Near Eastern societies, of which Israel was a part, the language of shepherd usually appeared in the plural.

The Lord is our shepherd. But here, rather uniquely in some instances, it appears in the singular. You are my shepherd.

This is meant to arrest the reader's attention, the Israelites, the faithful Israelites' attention. There are no generic people in God's family.

There's only Tommy and Dan and Kevin and Deborah and you. In a collectivist society, in a society that is forged and bound in these deep senses of social kinship, where the we and the are may be more primary than the me and the I, this language of the Lord is my shepherd does catch the attention of this faithful Israelite, because they are no longer in danger of thinking that they no longer matter, because they're simply part of this collectivist whole.

[11:32] Here, the language is very, very personal. The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Now, what's most striking about the psalm is that the Lord provides food and rest and guidance and protection in precisely the places where we often feel most helpless.

In death's dark valley, in the presence of enemies, and in our experiences of evil. or put in contemporary terms, in the face of a global pandemic, in the presence of a vicious anxiety, or in our experience of injustice and powerlessness.

The psalmist signals to the reader the critical importance of this reality by shifting suddenly into a second person address, from he to you, from he guides me to you are with me, from he leads to you comfort me, from he refreshes to you protect me.

It's a little bit like a little girl that I know, namely my daughter, who, one time, was trying to tell her daddy something that had made her sad at school, and her daddy was at his desk dealing with emails and notes and things that usually demanded his attention, and he felt was more important in the moment.

And he kept saying, uh-huh, and yes, and really, in a semi-absent-minded way, while writing his very important notes, and never really giving her, his daughter, eye contact.

[13:13] And the little girl suddenly bursts out, look at me, daddy. And here's the thing. God is never like this daddy. He always gives us that attentive, care-filled eye contact.

His care for us is always I, thou, not he, it. It's you and me. The King James translates verse 5 with the phrase, my cup runneth over.

Now the cup here is a shorthand for the whole meal, and it runneth over in the sense that God's provision always in some sense exceeds what we can ask or imagine. It's like when Father Christmas shows up in Narnia and surprises the wearied, dispirited travelers with gifts they never expected to receive.

To Mrs. Beaver, a new sewing machine. To Lucy, a bottle of magic cordial. And for all of them, a pot of hot tea and cream and sugar.

Finally, the experience of not wanting in Psalm 23 reaches its climax in the final benediction. After all the lying down and the guiding and the walking and the eating and the consummation of one's life, there is finally an arrival, home.

[14:33] Now as with the whole of the Psalter, let me suggest to you, Psalm 23 functions as a kind of counter-narrative to the primordial story.

In Genesis 3, the serpent asks Adam and Eve a question that he asks you and me both. Did God really say? And the presumed answer is no, he didn't.

In fact, I don't know his name. The serpent also asks our first parents a question whose intention is to sow doubt in their minds and ours as well.

Will God really take care of you? Will he really take care of you? Will he take care of you in the places that you feel your need most acutely and consistently?

And the presumed answer, again, is no. He cannot and will not take care of me. And finally, the serpent brazenly contradicts God's own words. God is cheating you, the Satan would say.

[15:33] So take what he owes you. Grasp it. Be like God, the sovereign of your own life. The presumption here is that if you don't take care of yourself, then you will always be in this state of lack.

In fact, for many of us, an oppressive, burdensome state of lack. So in what ways, dear friends, do you feel these temptations?

In what way do I feel these temptations in these trying days? Now that's the story of the first Adam. The story of Jesus, the last Adam, turns out, thank God, rather differently.

Satan's first temptation to Jesus in the wilderness, as you well know, to turn a few stones into a handful of bread loaves, to take care of himself, because presumably his father certainly will not. But Jesus, again, thank God, refuses this temptation, chooses to trust his father, the empirical evidence notwithstanding, and offers his body instead as bread for the whole world.

[16:39] When you look at the face of the wounded and resurrected Christ, you see the, I will be with you always, God. You look at this good shepherd, and you see the one who knows us by name and hears our voice.

There's a good chance that many of us have had experiences in life where we have not been seen, we have not been heard, we have not been known and loved for who we really, truly are.

I remember one experience many, many years ago, working in an organization where my immediate boss threw me under the bus, took credit for things that I had done, and when we were in conversation with the CEO of the company, he lied straight up to his face and to my face, and there was no way for me to save face.

And I resented him for months afterwards, because I felt that not only was I punished unjustly for things that I had not done, I was not seen for who I really was.

And if they really knew who I was, these things would not have happened. And there's a chance that you have had those kinds of experiences, perhaps in your relationship, in your marriage, or with your parents, or with siblings, or with friends, or with co-workers, where you have been seen and found wanting, you have been seen and judged, you have been seen falsely, you have not been seen and known and loved and cared for, for who you truly are.

[18:14] God, of course, our shepherd, is not that way. And yet the reality is, if we're honest with ourselves, we do not always experience the Lord as our shepherd in this particular way.

In Psalm 23, the psalmist finds himself traveling through life's terrain, and to all this activity in his life, he says, I shall not want. And yet when you and I look at our lives, we do want.

You do want. You want in your marriage. Your children may leave you wanting. Your parents denied you the care that you needed and deserved.

Your budget is strained. Your body is chronically in pain. Your job exhausts you. Your country fails you. Well, we're in want.

That is, for some of us, our perpetual condition is to be in want. So no, we cannot say, I shall not want. Not with a clean conscience. In Psalm 23, the psalmist faces death's dark valley and shares a meal in the presence of his enemies.

[19:19] And here, too, he says, I shall not want. But you want. If you're honest with yourself. If you look with a clear eye at the world around you, you feel anxious about the unpredictability of this virus.

Good God, what's going to happen in the fall? A global recession may ensue. Your small business may go bankrupt. Medical professionals feel overwhelmed.

Our black American brothers and sisters are violently choked and shot to death. Your elderly parents feel the worst. School administrators have no idea what they're really going to do, and if they have made a decision, not quite sure if it was the right one.

And perhaps you're in a situation, maybe you have children, maybe you know folks, friends who have children, or you have grandchildren. Some will be homeschooled. Some will be partially schooled. Some are actually going to school because that's their only option.

And we wish to protect and support and honor and love school administrators and school teachers. But we also keep in mind that there are single moms and dads.

[20:30] There are working moms and dads. There are folks who are in broken marriages. Folks who are headed on the way out of a marriage through divorce.

There are some in our families, maybe you in particular, maybe your children, who are struggling with mental health issues. Going to school, not to school, these are not easy decisions.

And we find ourselves feeling in this state of want that threatens to overwhelm us. In Psalm 23, finally we arrive at home joyfully not wanting for anything.

So says the psalmist. And yet, again, we want. Peter's grandfather and my aunt, my father's sister, died during this pandemic period of COVID-19.

And neither of us could go to the funeral. Those of us, or those of you who are single and extroverted or introverted, feel forsaken in some way in your isolation.

[21 : 31] If you have children or grandchildren or have friends or have a children's ministry that you have a great care for, you see many children who are fearing the unknowns and feel a kind of anxiety that perhaps they've never experienced.

And you worry that they will now carry a trauma in their bodies for years to come. Racial injustice continues to affect our churches. This whole thing is a dark valley and all we see are perhaps enemies everywhere.

Enemies of life. Enemies of hope. Enemies of sanity. We don't feel at home and we worry that God is deaf to our prayers. So here's the real question.

What does it really mean to say, the Lord is my shepherd? What if we really can't say this? What do we do? Well, allow me to offer two final practical suggestions as we bring this to a close.

First suggestion is this. You pray this psalm as Christians throughout centuries have in fact often prayed it as a petition in faith, not a statement of fact. You pray these words as a way perhaps to stumble towards the truth.

[22 : 46] If you struggle to believe that the Lord is your shepherd, then here's what I suggest. Consider pausing briefly. Whether in the morning times or noon times or evening times or any time in between.

Pause in the middle of your day and say out loud with whatever faith you can muster. Lord, I don't feel that you are my shepherd right now, but I desperately need you to be my shepherd.

Please be my shepherd this day, this hour, this moment. There's something that happens when we say out loud these things that are true. I'm not sure I understand the physics or the miraculous nature of it, but there's something powerful that happens when we say out loud the things that are true and bear witness perhaps to our heart.

And the Holy Spirit uses this confession, this profession of faith, this stumbling towards the truth to do something in our hearts, even if we can only say it in half-hearted or perhaps broken-hearted ways.

The second piece of advice I would offer to you is one that you are already familiar with, and that is to ask for help from others. You can't do it alone.

[24 : 04] It's again what Psalm 22 and Psalm 24 would remind us about the true nature, the true meaning of Psalm 23, that we cannot do it alone. We cannot be in this place of being able to say, I shall not want by ourselves.

So, if it means that we recommit to praying for one another in a way that perhaps we've never done with such a sense of urgency before, we do that. It means that we reach out to one another and we share generously with one another and that we do not give up easily on one another.

It means you say out loud to one another the truth that our hearts struggle to believe. And I understand how difficult it is to ask for help, not the first time, but perhaps not the second or even third time, but find yourselves in the same state of want, wanting for the same thing, needing for the same thing.

And you think to yourself, I don't want to be a bother. I don't want to be a burden to anyone. I'm tired of this same issue. And by that fourth and fifth time, you give up. And I want to urge and encourage you, don't give up.

Keep reaching out. Keep calling. Keep texting. Keep Marco poloing. Keep WhatsApping. Keep whatever it is. Keep reaching out in your expression of help and also offering that help to one another.

[25 : 24] So then, Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. These words are true. They're not always easy to say.

In fact, but the Lord offers them to us as a grace, as a gift to us, particularly in these trying and troubling times. Let me pray.

O Lord, where I feel needy today, may you satisfy me with your bread of life and with your living waters. Where I feel tempted to hide from others, Lord Jesus, may you, as my true shepherd, strengthen my heart to reach out to others.

And where I feel far from home, perhaps even far from home, in my own self, in my own house, may you, the true host, help me to be at home with you and I welcome you once again to make your home with me and my home with my family, with my community.

And I pray your blessing on this beautiful community of Church of the Advent. May you guard and protect and guide and be with them through their own valleys of the shadow of death in the presence of their own experience of enemies.

[26 : 48] Be their good shepherd. May they not be in want because they know deeply in their heart, soul, bodies, and bones that you are their good shepherd.

In your name I pray. Amen. Bless you, dear friends, and may God be with you and be your good shepherd this day and the days to come.