

The Lord is My Shepherd

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] As I mentioned at the beginning of the service, my family and I, we've been away on vacation for the last few weeks, and it was a fantastic time away. Sadly, because of the way the travel was scheduled, we were traveling on two Sundays.

This is actually my first time in any church in two weeks, and it's such a joy to be back in our home church with you all.

But we had a great time away, and it's a vacation that we try to take every summer, get two or three weeks together as a family, and all that was wonderful. But as I was thinking about this and coming back, it struck me, if I can be totally honest, that vacations are hard for me.

I find them difficult. I don't want to sound ungrateful. We had a great time, and the time with the kids was amazing. But vacations for me are also a time of anxiety because we go away, and we slow down, and the idea of vacation is to get away from your worries and relax.

And yet what I find to be true is that the minute I start to slow down, all of these anxieties start to break into my conscious mind. They start to crowd in on my thoughts. I can't really explain it, but I find myself worrying about things that I forgot to take care of.

[1 : 26] I find myself ruminating on decisions that I haven't made yet. I find myself stressing out over emails that I forgot to return before I leave, and I'm sure I owe half of you an email, so sorry about that.

But these things start to crowd in on me. The fact that I'm turning 40 at the end of the summer, that starts to hammer away in my brain.

I didn't think that would bother me, and yet, honestly, it's kind of starting to freak me out. I'm turning 40, and it feels like a big deal. That starts to kind of whisper away in the early hours of the morning in my mind, and then I start thinking about the deeper stuff.

You know, we're having a baby, God willing, in a couple of weeks, and I start thinking about the birth, and is that going to go okay? Is it going to go smoothly, or is there going to be some kind of complication?

You know, is our daughter going to come into the world as she should, you know? And so I start thinking about that. I start thinking about the new school that our boys are going to in the fall, and I'm wondering, are they going to be okay with this adjustment?

[2 : 28] All these things start churning away. And the best I can figure is that I go at such a pace for most of my life that all these things kind of stay in the back.

And then the minute I slow down and create enough space, all of it comes crashing in, and I begin to realize, I don't know that I'm actually dealing with these anxieties. I think what I'm actually doing is just distracting myself from busyness.

And the minute I slow down, there it is waiting for me. I don't know if you can identify with this, but I assume that anxiety is a very real part of your life as well.

I assume that job stress and financial stress and figuring out who you're going to date or who you're going to marry, or maybe if you're married, marital stress, kids stress, family stuff, friendship stuff.

I imagine that these things are weighing on you as they do me. And I don't know if you cope like I do by keeping yourself busy or if you have other ways of coping.

[3 : 33] You know, a lot of us love to self-medicate in a whole variety of ways. But I imagine anxiety is a kind of ubiquitous experience in this room. And, you know, statistically, 40 million adults in the U.S. actually have clinically diagnosed anxiety disorders.

And I know some of you here in this room have clinically diagnosed anxiety disorders. And you know better than anybody the challenge of living daily life struggling with anxiety.

And so the question that I want us to think about tonight is whether or not it is possible to actually deal with anxiety at its root, to root it out.

Or is the best we can hope for to cope and to get by a day at a time? The good news is this is not a new question.

This is a question that people have wrestled with for centuries. And certainly as we look at Scripture, I think there are very few people who had more anxiety or more reason to be anxious than David, than King David, the author of many of the psalms in the Psalter.

[4 : 42] And David, thankfully for us, I think one of his outlets was poetry and music. And I think this was one of the ways that he maybe decompressed.

And the good news about that is that God uses that to give us a window into his heart. So we can actually read the psalms and begin to get a sense of how his spirituality impacted things like anxiety.

How did he actually deal with these things? What did his belief about God have to do with the way he experienced his everyday life? And so we turn our attention now to Psalm 23, admittedly the most well-known psalm in the world.

And so some people may say, well, why are we going to be looking at Psalm 23? And I think partly because of the familiarity. You know, it can be so familiar that it actually is unfamiliar.

In other words, we assume that we understand it way better than we actually do. I think if we really understand Psalm 23, as much as we've heard it, as much as we know it in our heads, I think the more we really understand it, the more we will realize it is a powerful tool in the battle against anxiety.

[5 : 52] What it says about God and what it says about us, I think has the power to eradicate much of the anxiety that we struggle against.

So we're going to be looking at it almost as a meditation over the next several weeks. We're going to take it verse by verse. We want to take it very slowly. And our aim is depth. And so tonight we're just looking at the first verse.

And all I want to do is to make a few observations about verse 1 and then try to connect that to the anxiety that I know we are feeling in this room. So let me pray for us and then we'll open God's word together.

Lord, we do ask that as you are the good shepherd, you know, you know the things that are weighing us down right now. You know that there is major surgery scheduled for tomorrow.

You know that there are babies that are overdue or babies that are on their way. We know of at least one induction that's scheduled for tomorrow. Lord, we know that there are people struggling with cancer.

[6 : 58] We know that there are people fighting anxiety and depression and despair on a great scale. Lord, you know way better than we do the needs that are here in this room. And you promise that you are the great physician and that your word can do a kind of surgery in us.

And so we pray that you would use your word in that way tonight. That we would come to experience its truth and to glorify you in response. We pray this in your son's holiness. Amen.

So first I just want to read these words to you. And as I read this, I want you to think about David, the author. Think about the kind of life that David lived. It was not a sheltered, privileged life in some tower somewhere.

David had a hard life. As a son, as a young boy, he was systematically overlooked and disregarded by his father in favor of his older brothers.

Rejection by his father, right? He got a little older. He was a shepherd in his own right. And as a shepherd, he had to face loneliness. He had to face the threat of wild animals and robbers.

[8 : 09] Then a little bit later in his life, as a soldier, he was exposed to brutality and trauma and death. Some of you have been in the military and you know firsthand the reality of life when you're deployed.

A little bit later, as a politician, he didn't just have to worry about people assassinating his character. He actually had to worry about people assassinating him. Most of his career, I think there were people trying to kill him.

As a husband, he was unfaithful. And he had to deal with that guilt and regret. He lost his first wife. And he had to deal with that loss.

As a father, he had endured the death of an infant son. Maybe a worst fear for parents in the room. He had endured the rape of a daughter. Perhaps the other worst fear for parents. He had endured betrayal at the hands of one of his sons. He had endured the murder of another one of his sons. So if you think about his life, he had experienced tremendous hardship and challenge.

[9 : 16] As much or more than anybody here. And yet, in the midst of all that, he writes these words. He writes, Because the Lord is my shepherd.

I shall not want. And think about that declaration of confidence. I shall not want. I shall not want for anything.

Why? Because the Lord himself is my shepherd. It's almost as though he has a kind of supernatural contentment. This confidence that is inexplicable if you look at the details of his life.

So the question we ask is, how could he have this confidence? And that leads us to the next observation. And that is this. I want you to think about the kind of relationship that David is describing having with God.

Think about the way we think about God. The ideas that we have about what God is like. And think about the kind of relationship that David is describing having with God. The Lord is my shepherd.

[10 : 23] You know, that word shepherd is a powerful word. He's saying that God is not a distant, impersonal deity. He's not out there sort of concerned with other more important things.

He's not overlooking David or dropping the ball or just hasn't gotten around to it yet. He's saying that God is intimately, personally caring and compassionate and involved in the details of David's life.

The little things that David cares about. The seemingly insignificant details that God cares about those things. Because he cares about David. You know, like any God shepherd, he's saying God is my provider.

He's my physician. Right? He's my protector. He's my guide. This is the kind of ongoing reliance that I experience with the Lord.

It's an active, dynamic, dependent relationship. And it's an amazing statement for somebody to make about God. Especially in the Old Testament. In the Psalter, this is the most intimate by far way that God has been described at this point in the Psalter.

[11 : 33] He's not just a king. He's not just a creator. He's not just the giver of the law. He's my shepherd. And that's an amazing statement. But it also raises a question.

Right? We always want to be comprehensive here. We always want to ask the hard questions. This, for me, a kind of red flag popped up when I was reading this a couple of weeks ago. Here's the question.

If it hasn't occurred to you yet. If God is David's good shepherd, then how do we explain that list that I just laid out for you?

How do we understand all of those horrible things that David has endured? Where was God? How was God letting those things happen? Was God just off duty?

How do we understand it? And I think the key, and this leads us to the third observation, is understanding the word want. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

[12 : 31] You know, for years I would hear this and see it in pastels framed on people's walls and things. And I would think, what that means is, the Lord is my shepherd. I no longer have any wants because God gives me everything that I want.

You know, I want it. I ask God. He gives it to me. He's my shepherd. Therefore, I don't have anything else to want because he's given it all to me. And I thought, that's great. But the good news is, that's wrong.

The good news is, that's wrong. That's not, in fact, what it says. The Hebrew actually is better translated, lack. I shall not lack. There's a big difference between want and lack.

Right? Because what is he saying? He's saying, God is not the kind of God who gives us everything we want. He's the kind of God who gives us everything we need. And there are times when the thing that we want is also the thing that we need.

And God gives us what we want. And hallelujah, praise Jesus. God the provider. But there's an equal number of times, and if you're anything like me, probably more often, when the thing we want is not necessarily what we need.

[13 : 37] And by not giving us what we want, God is, in fact, giving us what we need. And so what David is saying is, God is the good shepherd. Just like we prayed in that collect earlier today. God knows better than we know what we need.

He knows the things that we're too ignorant to ask for. And because he's the good shepherd, he gives us those things. And often, they may be things that we don't want. We say, I do not want that, God.

Get that out of my life. I don't want to have to deal with it. I don't want to have to think about it. Please keep it away. God says, I love you, and you need this. You need it. And it's hard to understand how it all plays out.

I don't think in this life we ever will understand how all of it plays out, how it all makes sense. I don't know if you're familiar with Elizabeth Elliott. But she's kind of been a sort of mentor, or when she was alive, a kind of mentor and continuing to be to me through her writing.

And she lost her husband. Tragically, he was killed on the mission field. And so she writes about the pain and the struggle of trying to make sense of that. And so in one of her books, she's writing about that.

[14 : 42] And she actually writes about British shepherds. She says, you know, British shepherds have this thing that they do regularly for their sheep, where they will take their sheep. And they have this big vat of antiseptic liquid.

Smells bad. Smells like chemicals. Looks horrible. It's terrifying. And they will lift the sheep up, and they will plunge the sheep into this vat of antiseptic liquid. And they have to submerge the sheep entirely.

They have to get the ears, the nose, the mouth, the eyes. It all has to go completely under. Right? And if the sheep tries to get out, there are sheep dogs barking. And they have sticks. And they're prodding the sheep.

And they're trying to push it under the water. And if you just walked in off the street, you would say, animal cruelty. You would call the authorities. And you would say, put a stop to this right now. The sheep are terrified.

And they're fighting and fighting and fighting to get out. But the shepherds have to do it. Why? Because if they aren't regularly treated with the antiseptic, they will be victim to disease and to parasites that will ultimately cause horrible suffering and death.

[15 : 45] And so it's absolutely necessary for the well-being of the sheep. And here's what Elliot says about this. She says, I've had some experiences in my life which have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor sheep.

I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from the shepherd I trusted. And he didn't give me a hint of explanation. As I watched the struggling sheep, I thought, if only there were some way to explain.

But such knowledge is too wonderful for them. It is high. They cannot attain unto it. The point is, I think David, probably many times in his life, felt like he was being plunged under the dark water. It didn't make sense. God didn't explain himself. He looked up from the depths of woe and cried to God, why? Why is this happening? Why are you doing this to me?

Where were you? Why are my prayers unanswered? Why are you doing this to me? And he didn't understand. And I think that many of us have been through, are going through, or will go through those experiences.

[16 : 54] Looking up from under the water, feeling overwhelmed and suffocated and crushed. Pressed to our limits. I can't take it. I don't think we're ever going to understand in this life.

All the whys behind why God does what he does when he does it. And yet if you look at David's words, his heartfelt prayer.

He trusts God. Even though he doesn't understand why. He trusts him. And that leads us to the last observation that I want to make.

Which I think really gets to the heart of this verse and how it connects to our lives. Notice the structure of the verse. If you want to understand the psalm, look at the structure. The Lord is, I shall. The Lord is, I shall. You can almost insert a therefore. Therefore, the Lord is, therefore I shall. Do you see the principle there?

[18 : 03] Whatever it is that we believe about God. And I'm not just talking about does God exist. Right? That is an important question. But it's not the only question. Whatever we believe about

God's character.

What kind of God is he? Will directly determine how we experience everyday life. Including things like fear and anxiety.

And to reverse that. However we experience our daily life. And however we try to deal with things like anxiety. That is going to reflect what we ultimately actually believe about God.

And so we can tell from David's words. We can trace that back. And say even though David doesn't understand why he's had to go through some of the things he's had to go through.

He trusts God. He believes in God's goodness. He believes that God is his good shepherd. So I just want to pull all of this together.

[19 : 00] David is this man who has faced tremendous hardship and anxiety throughout his life. And yet he seems to have had this supernatural contentment. Because first of all he knew that God was his good shepherd.

Not just a nice idea. He knew it here. Knew that God was his good shepherd. He knew that because of that. God would therefore provide everything he needed. Not necessarily what he wanted.

But what he needed. And he believed that even in the hardships and struggles. God was providing for him. Why and how did he know that? Because ultimately when it came down to it.

He trusted God's character. He trusted God's character. God's character. So now let's ask how does this all tie into and connect with our daily lived experience here in Washington, D.C.

And as I think about anxiety and all that has been written and said about anxiety. There are many explanations out there for why anxiety even exists. Right.

[20 : 00] Some people say well fundamentally it's a physiological issue. And it's a physiological problem. And there's a DNA component. And it's hereditary. And to a certain extent some of that is true.

Right. Other people say well this is fundamentally a philosophical issue. People like Spinoza say this is rooted in philosophy. Other people say well this is a. It's indicative of other underlying medical conditions.

Other people say it's purely psychological. It's the result of repressed drives and urges. Other people say well actually this is a cultural thing. We live in an anxiety producing culture. And that's why we have 40 million adults with anxiety disorders.

And you know there are parts of all of those things that are true. And some people are more prone than others. And some people need medication. And some people need therapy. And all of that is true. But under all of that.

At the core. Anxiety is a spiritual problem. It's a spiritual problem. Because the Bible says that our core problem.

[21 : 03] Is that we live life separated from God. That our earliest grandparents decided they no longer wanted to worship God as God.

Rather they wanted to become like God. Little gods. And so in effect they said to God. The Lord is not my shepherd.

The Lord is no longer my shepherd. In fact it's demeaning to call me a sheep. I'm not a sheep. I'm a shepherd. I don't need a shepherd.

Thank you. I am fully capable of living life on my own. By my rules. On my terms. And because of that. And the separation that has resulted.

We find ourselves. In a world. Trying to control. What we ultimately cannot control. And you know a great definition for anxiety.

[22 : 01] Trying to control. That which we cannot control. That's what anxiety is. It's all about control. I mean think about the things that haunt you. So I just think about the things that haunt me.

What haunts me? Well if I'm honest. I'm trying to control other people. And what they do. The decisions they make. I'm trying to control their opinions. I'm trying to control how they think about me.

I'm trying to manage those things. What else am I trying to control? I'm trying to control my own body. I'm trying to control my own health. I'm trying to do things. To try to add a year or two to my life.

But ultimately. It can all end tonight. What else am I trying to control? I'm trying to control outcomes. I'm trying to control outcomes. Situations. And the way they're going to play out. I'm trying to control the future.

I'm trying to control all of these things that I can't control. And that will drive you crazy. It will make you anxious. And I think deep down we all actually know that.

[22 : 57] That's the thing. I think we know that. On some deep level. There's an op-ed that I clipped. Back in 2013. That I love. And I come back to it from time to time.

The title of it. It's by Mark Epstein. Who's a psychiatrist. In the New York Times. And the title is. The Trauma of Being Alive. Isn't that great? And I think he wrote a book by the same title.

The Trauma of Being Alive. And here's what he says. An undercurrent of trauma. Runs through ordinary life. Shot through as it is. With the poignancy of impermanence.

Isn't that fascinating? Life is traumatic on a daily basis. Because of how poignantly aware we are. That nothing lasts. That everything fades.

He says there's no way to be alive. Without being conscious. Of the potential for disaster. And some people are like. That is me. That is me. Right? I mean I know some people are just like.

[23 : 56] That's how I live every day of my life. I know that disaster is out there. Right? And he says you can't live life. Without that awareness. One way or another. Death hangs over us all. Nobody is immune.

Our world is unstable and unpredictable. And operates to a great degree. And despite incredible scientific advancement. Outside our ability to control it.

We have no control. And in the face of that reality. We have a choice. Either we go on living as our own shepherds.

Trying to make our way. Trying to control things that we ultimately cannot control. At the mercy of a cold, unfeeling universe.

Or we run into the arms of the good shepherd. We run into the arms of the good shepherd. And that's the decision I think that lies at the heart of every major anxiety in our lives.

[25 : 00] As I think about. And you know. Life is anxiety producing. There are lots of little anxieties. Right? Traffic makes us anxious. But when there's an anxiety in your life that is overwhelming. When it's the kind of thing that you just cannot get away from.

And it churns and churns and churns. Chances are at the core of that. This decision. Lies at the heart of it. The decision of.

Am I going to be my own shepherd? Or am I going to actually trust. The good shepherd? Am I. Am I. Am I rejecting God? Or am I rejecting. What scripture says about God?

Or am I actually clinging to him? Right? And I'm saying on one level. We may be doubting his existence. But as I said before. I think for many of us. Especially who are Christians. This is not a Christian.

Non-Christian divide. Lots of Christians. At our core. In these little areas. Are functional atheists. You know. I'm a Christian in name. I go to church. I really believe this stuff.

[25 : 59] But in this area of my life. Where there's a tremendous amount of anxiety. I'm actually a functional atheist. I really don't believe that God is here. I don't trust God. If he is there. So it's worth going deep in your heart.

And asking yourself. Honestly. Do I really believe. That God is god? Do I really believe. That he's trustworthy? Do I really believe. That he's compassionate? Do I really believe. That he cares? Or do I believe. That God is distant? Do I believe. That God is capricious? Do I believe. That God is untrustworthy? Do I believe. That he's. Preoccupied.

That I'm not worth his time. What do I actually believe? And as we said before. Whatever that is. It will dramatically impact. How we face. Anxious situations. So the last question.

We'll ask is this. How do we know. That we can actually trust God. With those precious areas of our life. That we cling to. With a white knuckled grip. How can we know?

[26 : 56] Thus lies the power. Of John chapter 10. Where Jesus shocks his listeners. When he says in verse 11. I am.

The good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life. For the sheep. And you know. Everybody knew. What he was really saying.

This is not a teacher. Using a mighty metaphor. To describe how much he cares. For his students. He's referring to Ezekiel chapter 34. This amazing place.

Where in verse 15. God who is fed up. With the unfaithfulness. Of the teachers of Israel. He's fed up. And he says. The day is coming. When I myself.

I myself. Will be the shepherd of my people. See other religions. The founder. They found the religion. And then they die. And then the followers take over. And it morphs. And it changes. And so on and so forth.

[27 : 50] God says. No. That doesn't happen here. One day. I will be the shepherd. I will come. And I will make them lie down. I will lead them. To green pastures.

Besides still waters. I will do these things. In the flesh. And so of course. When Jesus stands. And he says. I am the good shepherd. Everybody's hearing. Ezekiel 34.

How do we know? Because in verse 31. They pick up stones. To kill him. For blasphemy. Who says this? But of course. Jesus was true to his word.

He did exactly. What the good shepherd should do. Right? He laid down his life. For the sheep. How do we know? That he's the shepherd. Who will make sure. We lack for nothing.

Because he gave up. Everything. He gave up. Everything. So that we would lack. Nothing. In what we ultimately need. As human beings.

[28 : 48] In this world. So how do we know. We can trust him? Look at the cross. Look at the cross. And so. Over the next few weeks. What I hope. We can do together.

As a community. Is to look at Psalm 23. Verse by verse. And what I want you to do. I'm just going to invite you. To do this. Just look at your life.

And figure out. Where are the things. That I am. Where am I ruminating? Where am I spending. Too much time and energy? Where is the anxiety. Really sourced. In my life right now? And identify those areas.

And then I invite you. To begin to pray. These words. Of Psalm 23. Into those situations. Don't expect magic. Don't expect. An overnight cure. What we're talking about. Is rehabilitating.

Our hearts. Learning how to. Stop being. Our own shepherds. And to run into the arms. Of the good shepherd. We have to habituate. Ourselves to do that. Through prayer.

[29 : 41] So you can just take. Verse one. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. I shall not lack. And pray that. Into the situation. Right. So I think about. The birth of our daughter.

Coming up. And I think. I would pray. Lord. You're my shepherd. You're the shepherd.

Of my wife. Laura. You're the shepherd. Of Riley. And Maddox. And you're the shepherd. Of this little girl. Already. In a way that I can't even. Begin to understand. You know her into me. And Lord. I know that because I can trust you. When I look at the cross. And I see the kind of God you are. I know that I can trust you. With her. And my wife. In this situation. That I cannot control. I know that. However things play out. Or whatever happens. You are always. Constantly providing me. Exactly what I need. And so I relinquish this part of my life to you. I trust you.

[30 : 36] It's better in your hands than in mine. Take it. Be my shepherd. And we can pray these things. Into these situations.

To preach to our own hearts. To teach our own hearts. How to trust the good shepherd. More deeply. With more of our lives. So let's stop coping. And start beginning to root out.

And deal with our anxiety. Because ultimately. What is anxiety? It's a daily reminder. That on our own. We are separated from God. The source of life. And meaning.

And provision. And projection. And guidance. And it's an invitation. Every time we feel anxiety. Either to continue.

Trying to be our own shepherds. Which is crazy making. Or it can be something. That drives us into the arms. Of the good shepherd. Let's pray.