

Psalms For All Seasons: The Shepherd's Psalm

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, July 23rd. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here. And you, people often think, why does he say that every Sunday?

I know who he is. Well, it's because we have a podcast, and we have a phone line, and people who are not here here are still connecting with us. And so people may hear the voice, hear our sermons, but not here, not necessarily be here in person.

We have someone visiting this morning who said, I have listened to you before. And I said, well, now you know this and this. So that's good. So just a quick note, actually one other note.

First of all, I need to make eye contact with the person for whom this information is relevant and pertinent, and make sure it's okay. Let's say there was a landmark birthday that happened in the last while.

Would it be okay for me to mention that? I'm seeing everybody looking around. The person who I'm asking specifically is looking around. So someone had an 80th birthday recently.

[1 : 09] Is it okay for me to say? Evelyn Fedorik celebrated her 80th birthday recently. So happy birthday, Evelyn.

God bless you. God bless you. I should be so lucky to live that long. And Michelle should be so lucky to have me around now.

No, no. So welcome to everyone, however they're joining. Is it hot in here? It feels really hot in here. I said, well, at least it's the same temperature that it was in the middle of the night when I wasn't sleeping.

So there's that, I guess. So people are joining us in person or listening online in the days ahead. And so welcome to all those people. And welcome to all of you here this morning to see your faces. It's lovely. So just a quick note. Paul Hay will be preaching next Sunday. He said to me this morning, that is next Sunday, right? And I said, yes, I think so, yeah. So he will be preaching next Sunday.

[2 : 10] And again, if you're saying, why is this pastor here and away and here and away? Well, the summer is the only time I have to take my holidays. And our treasurer says to me, you got to take your holidays, man.

And we end up accumulating other time. And so Wendy reminds me that I need to make sure we do that. So this is going to be, I was reflecting on it, probably one of our last family trips for some time. So now that both of our kids are either moving out or moving into new adventures in their lives, this is a time of transition and change for us.

And it's a bit sad. It makes me feel super old. But it's also a time of new experiences for us. As I was saying to Eldon, we a few weeks ago, I said, so this is our reality.

And he said, yeah, he said, it's sad at first. And then he said, and then, he got crazy eyes. And then he said, and then it's great. And I said, Eldon, wow.

[3 : 13] So yeah, an exciting time, but certainly a time of transition and change for us. So who did their Psalms homework from last Sunday? Oh, one, two, three, four, five.

I mean, it's like pastor. Yeah, you get to read the Bible all the time. I'm not gonna ask any questions about it, but just a reminder, try to read a Psalm or two or three or seven.

Between, try and do it once a day between now and the end of this series. And maybe we will actually get some people to reflect on them in the weeks ahead. I was struck by, and I mean, I know this.

I took a course on Psalms in seminary. The depth and breadth of emotion that's reflected in the Psalms. I picked four different ones, very different, as random as I could, and just saw anguish and pain and anger and then joy and hope and encouragement and all of those things reflected.

So as we've talked about beginning last week, this new series that we've started, Psalms for all seasons. So together we're learning that the book of Psalms is, as I just reflected on there, a book for all seasons of our lives, all of our circumstances, whatever we're going through, the book of Psalms speaks to that.

[4 : 47] And as I mentioned last week, the book of Psalms is not just a collection of chapters and verses. I think we may, maybe we don't recognize that, or maybe we don't think about it, but it's actually a collection of 150 songs, some of the greatest songs ever written.

And you may say, well, I prefer the Stones, I prefer Bach, that's more my kind of song. But the Psalms literally are written as songs, and they were intended to be sung.

And maybe one day, probably not this side of heaven, we will sing these songs the way they were meant to be sung. And wouldn't that be awesome? So if you're a music lover like I am, you likely have a list of favorite songs.

Lots of mine are in the 80s, because that's when my song brain was formed. Our kids have said to me, one of the greatest gifts I ever gave to them, or Michelle and I ever gave to them, was an appreciation for 80s music.

And I thought, oh, is that it? Well, faith, and then an appreciation for 80s music. So there are likely songs for all of us, unless you're really not a music person, and let me know and I'll pray for you.

[5 : 56] But if you are a music person, you likely have songs that get your toes tapping, songs that get your energy going, that move your emotions. Did you know that the song that is the most sung, how appropriate for this morning, the song that is most often sung is Happy Birthday.

That may be the case, but also one of the most loved and familiar songs for many people is actually Psalm 23. Because as I said, it is a song.

So among literary scholars, or poetry scholars, or biblical scholars, Psalm 23 is generally regarded by many of them as the single greatest piece of literature ever written.

Can you imagine that? Can you wrap your head around that? Among Christians, Psalm 23 may actually be the most encouraging and frequently memorized chapter of Scripture.

I don't know if you've ever memorized it in your life. I have. And then I forget it. And then I memorize it again. And then I forget it. But it's recited at more bedsides and gravesides in every season than almost any other passage.

[7 : 09] So we're going to be looking at Psalm 23, or you may know it as the 23rd Psalm. Many people refer to it that way. And we're going to look at it in the English Standard Version translation.

And why do you ask that? Because this is the version, the wording of this version, is likely the one that you will be the most familiar with. Psalm 23.

So you can grab a Bible from the pew in front of you, or if you have your Bible with you, or you can just listen as I read it. 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 paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

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.

[8 : 08] You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. This poem of David, and how do I know it's of David, is your Bible translation will likely identify it right at the beginning as being a psalm of David. So this poem of David consists of actually seven simple statements. And we'll go through them this morning. So we're going to walk through Psalm 23, the shepherd psalm together.

In his childhood days, you probably know this about him or would remember a bit about him, David was a shepherd. And he tended his father's sheep on the hillsides of Judea.

David would have definitely known what it was like to be a good shepherd. He had background and literal context for this. Community. Westerners think like individuals.

[9 : 19] We tend to think in terms of, maybe you can relate to this, we think of terms like me or my or I. But David writes as a Middle Easterner.

And in that community, people would tend to think more in terms of community, as a group of people. They would think in terms like we and ours and us.

When they see the 11, when they would have seen the 11 I, me, my statements in this poem, this song, they don't think of themselves as being alone, but rather being themselves in the context of a

community, of a flock of people.

So yes, these promises are here for me, but they are also promises for all of us. And all of us get to experience the life that David describes in this song with the shepherd.

Sheep. We've been talking about sheep a lot this year. David writes this psalm, this song, from the perspective of a sheep. So what do we know about sheep?

[10:28] Well, lots of things. America's national symbol is an eagle. Great Britain's is the lion. Russia's is the bear.

Scotland's is the unicorn, which is fictional, I think. And Canada's is the mighty beaver. So no nation, though, has ever designated the sheep as its national symbol, have they?

Well, why? No one wants to be a sheep. Right? The context of that concept of being a sheep in our society means you are a follower.

You don't think on your own. You're helpless. That's kind of the context that we might have. We may think of sheep as dumb and defenseless and dependent.

3D. But the Lord truly is. If the Lord truly is your shepherd, then, friends, you are a sheep. It's no, there's no other way to put it than that.

[11:35] So David's first statement summarizes the entire psalm, the entire song. He says, The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. So this implies that when the Lord is my shepherd, when the Lord is your shepherd, all our wants are taken care of.

And then the other six statements of the psalm illustrate how that initial promise is true, and then they just confirm it over and over and over again and show how that initial promise is fulfilled.

So the second statement, David says, He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. Have you ever read this psalm and thought, well, this is kind of pushy, isn't it? He makes me lie down. It feels like a toddler being put down for a nap. Do you remember, I still remember being little and being told it was time to nap and being unhappy, truly unhappy about that.

And this statement, He makes me lie down, makes it sound like there's force or coercion involved, doesn't it? But what David actually means here is he settles me down.

[12:50] He calms me down. He settles me down in green pastures. And the Lord settles His sheep in green pastures by leading them to places of refreshment, places of nourishment that they could not find on their own.

That's what the shepherd does. So, to give this kind of contemporary language, because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

There's a direct connection. He settles me down in green pastures. The second part of this sentence is He leads me beside still waters.

The good shepherd leads me, David says. He doesn't drive me. This is not like a cattle drive where you've got cowboys on horses herding in a certain direction.

The shepherd does this. The shepherd leads the sheep by walking slowly ahead, but being aware of where the sheep are at all times. He calls to the sheep, and as we've explored before, the sheep know His voice.

[14:01] There's comfort and connection and relationship there. The phrase He leads me beside still waters is literally beside stilled waters, calm waters.

From some of the reading I did, sheep are generally afraid to, you know, they consulted sheep and took a survey. Sheep are generally afraid to drink from moving water even if it's shallow.

Why? Well, you know how absorbent wool is, right? Well, they seem to instinctively know that if they get caught in moving water, their wool will become saturated and they will drown.

They could potentially drown. So the water they drink from needs to be still, needs to be stilled. So let's continue this again.

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He settles me in green pastures. He leads me beside stilled waters. waters.

[15:04] The third statement says, he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. So in the reading I did, in Hebrew, the first part of this sentence actually reads, he brings me back.

He restores my soul. He brings me back. In his book, The Good Shepherd, author Ken Bailey explains it this way. This makes it clear that the sheep is lost and the good shepherd is obliged to go after it, to find it, and to carry it back.

Bailey continues, shepherds in the Holy Land have told me, told him, that once a sheep knows it's lost, it tries to hide under a bush or a rock and begins quivering and bleating, begins to panic. The shepherd must locate it quickly, lest it be heard and killed by a wild animal. Their natural tendency to be scared attracts danger.

And then on being found, Bailey says, it's usually too traumatized the sheep is to walk on its own. It must be carried back to the rest of the flock.

[16:23] It must be carried back to the village. So this, friends, is why the shepherd must lead the sheep back to paths of righteousness.

Back to the right paths. Back to paths that are safe for them. A lost sheep can't find its way home. So I'm no shepherd, but I have owned dogs in my life that if they get their nose to the ground and they get off in the trees, good luck. So as a lost sheep, my only hope, really, is the shepherd. Once I'm lost, I need the shepherd. Once I've strayed off the path, he must come and carry me, potentially, back to safety. And I can't do it alone.

I need the shepherd. A good shepherd finds the lost sheep. Jesus says that he would leave the flock to find the one.

[17:25] The good shepherd picks them up. He carries them home. Yes, for their sake, because he loves them. but also, as the psalm says, for his name's sake, for his personal reputation's sake.

So let's review for a second. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He settles me in green pastures.

He leads me beside quieted waters. He brings me back from the wrong path and leads me onto the right path for his name's sake, for his glory.

So now we come to perhaps the most important line in the poem, in the psalm. The fourth statement. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

So I remember as a little kid hearing this part of this verse and just thinking, boy, that sounds spooky and dangerous and intriguing, right?

[18:37] The valley of the shadow of death. Well, there are certain places in the Holy Land where there is sandstone that has been carved by wind and carved by rain for centuries.

And there are deep, dark valleys of danger that are no joke to sheep or to people. Connor and I were re-watching Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade the other night.

And so if you've heard of the city of Petra, it's featured in that film. And we have a picture of it.

There we go. So there's Petra way at the end of that passage.

And if you've, you can always Google it, but look up the city of Petra. My mom did a paper on it in Bible school when she was young.

And it is an outstanding achievement. It is carved into the stone wall beyond that passage. So check it out if you don't know of it.

[19:44] But it's built into the sand walls of an ancient area in Jordan. And it's one of those potentially dangerous valleys as you can see it there. And from this picture you can see how narrow those walls are.

They're actually so close together that most of the time they can keep out the sun. And when there's a flood, there's really nowhere to run. There's nowhere to go.

There's one channel, one way in, one way out. And these narrow canyons can become literally a valley of death. death. In his book Shepherd of All, George Lamsa, who wrote that book, writes, valleys of the shadow of death are paths which wind in between mountains where there are dark shadows and deep gorges.

Travelers march slowly and silently to avoid being seen or heard by bandits. There's another danger there. The fear of death is constantly on their minds because they know they're vulnerable. They tremble like sheep. They expect trouble or death at any time while they are passing through these vulnerable places. I don't know about you, but there are probably times in your life when you've recognized this.

[21:02] Fear can be paralyzing, can't it? Sometimes these valleys, these passageways in our lives cannot be avoided, whether it's in Israel or in your life.

There are times when I've described a situation or circumstance as feeling like I need to pass through the eye of a needle and I need to do it alone with God, but alone.

So I may have friends or family or colleagues or whatever surrounding me saying, no problem, you can do it, you've got it. You know, people saying, just do your rehab on your hand, you'll be fine.

Study for this test, you'll be great. But ultimately, it's us and the shepherd, that's it. So for sheep, danger is a real issue because they have no defenses of their own and maybe that's why no one has chosen them as a national animal.

Lion, dangerous and scary. Bear, dangerous and scary. Beaver, eh, maybe fear tree. But the defender of the sheep is the shepherd, which leads us to David's fifth statement and it explains why he isn't afraid.

[22 : 16] David says, I will fear no evil. Why? Because for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, we sung a little bit in reference to that this morning, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

So as we read in this sentence from the psalm, a shepherd would have had two main tools. And believe it or not, 54 years old, heard this psalm a bajillion times over the course of my life and never really stopped to think, what does the rod and the staff mean?

Why are they tools that a shepherd would have had? Well, now I know and soon you will too. A shepherd's rod would have been a club, about two and a half feet long.

So this picture gives you an idea and I'll describe them for you. About two and a half feet long, usually carved out of a piece of wood and it would have had a knot in the end, a big lump on one end.

Shepherds would have often embedded pieces of iron in this device, in this tool, to add strength and add weight to the knot. Makes you think different about shepherds, doesn't it?

[23 : 31] So imagine a wooden club, which is essentially the wooden equivalent of a medieval weapon known as a mace. Do you know what a mace looked like? Big piece of steel with a ball and spikes on the end of it.

Formidable medieval weapon. Shepherd's rod. So wolves and bears are taller than sheep, right? Generally. So the shepherd could throw his club over the sheep, over their heads, over the backs of the sheep to knock a predator in the head, to scare them off, to injure them and dissuade them from attacking.

And that would have been a fairly formidable weapon. And a shepherd's staff, or crook as they're called, is just like what you've seen in pictures. It's a long stick with a curve on the end of it.

The shepherd would have used it for climbing, would have used it to direct the sheep who huddled around him. It's long enough to reach and guide the closest sheep.

[24 : 38] I always think of stage productions where the hook comes out and pulls somebody off when their time is up. It's like that too. It's usually about five feet long or so.

You see them in different lengths. The shepherd would have always had it close by. So the shepherd would have had these two implements, a rod and a staff. When a sheep or a lamb can't scramble down from a ledge or falls into a crevice, the shepherd would use the staff to catch him by the leg or shoulder to lift him back onto the path.

And then as I said, the rod is used for protecting the flock from potential threats. Staff is for directing and the rod is for defending. So the sight of these two tools, whether they recognized it or not, would have comforted the sheep.

The sixth statement in this psalm says, You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil.

My cup overflows. In this verse, maybe you've recognized it before or not, David shifts his focus. He moves from being a sheep to being a guest.

[25 : 58] And in his mind, God moves from being a shepherd to being a host. To prepare a table, and you've probably thought of this before, essentially means to prepare a meal, to prepare to receive company, to receive guests.

And this host, my host, prepares my meal in the presence of my enemies. Now, I don't have a lot of enemies that I'm aware of anyway.

Maybe you do, maybe you don't. But your enemies would be people who would be perceived to be hostile towards you. And the host knows that if he's preparing a meal for me, there may be people watching who are hostile towards me, who would then, by association, become hostile towards my host as well.

But he doesn't care. he loves us enough to bear the scorn of people who don't like me, who don't want me around. In the Middle East, excellent hosts would have done more than serve you food.

And we see examples of this throughout the New Testament. They demonstrated amazing hospitality. And that's one of the things that I am deeply moved by constantly in our congregation is

we are a hospitable, kind, and caring people who are so deeply gifted in the ways of showing care for others.

[27 : 26] One way a host would have done this in the Middle East would be washing your feet. We don't do a lot of foot washing around here but maybe we should.

But a second is that they may have anointed your head with oil. That would have been something else. This is not something, so if you read this in Scripture and think, I don't want someone pouring a cup of cooking oil on my head, thanks, but no thanks.

That's our understanding of oil, but it's not quite the same. So what this would have involved is pouring a sweet smelling lotion on you that would have made you feel good all over.

This is the kind of oil that the woman used to wipe Jesus' feet and used her hair to dry it. This would have helped a lot. It would have been a blessing.

Usually this would have been expensive and it would have helped a lot in a pre-deodorant culture. So as David's host pours oil on his head, the enemies who are present are infuriated by this.

[28 : 31] His host is sparing no effort, no expense, showing extravagant hospitality to make this one whom they hate feel special.

And if that's not bad enough, as we continue to read here, waiters are hovering around him. Every time he takes a sip of wine, they refill his cup.

It is overflowing and he can never drink it down. And you may think, well, Pastor Kent, this is supposed to be a spiritual cup, not a literal one. Well, it's actually both and.

There's an allegory here, but it has a literal meaning as well. So as David reflects on his life, he sees it for what it is, a lifelong journey with a shepherd and a host who cares for his every need, who is leading him and watching out for him everywhere he goes.

David is saying, I'm never going to complain again. With my God, it's always an overflowing cup. It's always the best robe. It's always the fattened calf.

[29 : 41] It's always immeasurable joy. Maybe your life is this way too. If the Lord is your shepherd, my brothers and sisters, this is your psalm.

This is your promise. The promise that God makes here is yours as well. Because this is your life. He settles you in green pastures.

He leads you beside still waters. He carries you back from the wrong path. And he leads you back onto the right path for his name's sake.

Even during the times when you walk through your valleys of shadow and death, and that may look very different for each one of us, you don't have to fear evil because your shepherd is with you.

He carries a rod to protect you and a staff to direct you. He prepares your daily food even while your enemies are watching. And he pours oil on your head and never lets your cup get emptied.

[30 : 58] As David thinks about how God has always cared for him, he thinks about the future and proclaims this in the seventh and final statement. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

If the Lord is your shepherd, you are not being followed by evil. You're being followed by goodness and mercy all the days of your life.

And if that's not enough, because the shepherd is also a host, he's prepared a place for you. It's called heaven. And you will live with him in his house forever.

This, my friends, Psalm 23, is a good song. If the Lord is your shepherd, you have known known, sorry, you are known, you are cared for, you are loved, and you will have satisfaction every day and forever.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Nine words, maybe you counted, maybe you didn't, you're probably counting now.

[32 : 31] Nine words, and you know the most, I actually counted again to make sure it was nine.

The most important word in all nine, my. Lots of people know that the Lord is a shepherd, lots know that he is the shepherd, shepherd, but only some know him as their shepherd.

When you reflect on your life right now, who is your shepherd? It's a rhetorical question. Is it your spouse?

Is it your friend? Your pastor? someone else in your life who is a mentor or speaks truth into your life?

Those are all good options, but no one can shepherd you like Jesus. No one can shepherd you like the good shepherd.

No one can give you the advice or the comfort or the provision and assurance that you need like Jesus can. When you come to a place where you can say with conviction, I follow Jesus, then like David, you can also say, the Lord is my shepherd.

[34 : 01] And what comes with that, what should come out of that immediately is a sense of freedom, a sense of peace as you reorient yourself, reorient your life to a place that recognizes that because Jesus is your shepherd, you shall not want because he takes care of you, because he will supply everything for you that you need.

Friends, if Jesus is truly your shepherd, let him lead you, let him care for you, and follow him. and remember that the good shepherd, this good shepherd, will not force his way into your life. You must invite him in and let him lead.

This is a poem to learn from and live by. So read it again this week. Maybe I'll give you a freebie. Focus on the 23rd Psalm this week.

Read it over a few times. Ask God what he's got for you in there, what he's telling you. Because the Lord is your shepherd. I'm not just making this up.

[35 : 21] This is truth. You'll never have wants. You'll have security and peace. So you'll never have to fear. but you'll be able to face this world with faith and with hope and face the world to come with amazing anticipation.

Amen.