The King's Shepherd

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[0:00] It would be difficult to point to a psalm that is as familiar and well known as Psalm 23.! Its words have comforted countless people in bereavement, in periods of uncertainty in their life, when you're not real sure what's happening and what's going to happen.

In moments of serious affliction and trial. And it's for good reason that it has brought such tremendous comfort. In fantastic imagery, the psalm portrays our tender and loving God who is faithful to provide and faithful to protect and faithful to bless.
Not only meeting the needs that we have, but often overflowing us with blessing and goodness from His hand. And in the midst of grief and the prospect of danger, what could be more comforting to know that God Almighty is with you, that He promises to carry you through.
So, Psalm 23 brings tremendous comfort to us, doesn't it? It's a much beloved psalm. Most of you probably have it memorized even. That brings me to another point about the psalm.
And that is, as with many passages that are familiar like this one, it can also be somewhat dangerous for us if we're not careful. It's not uncommon for someone to seek comfort from this psalm without ever considering how the blessings of the psalm are actually applied to us.
[1:37] We can often too quickly move to personal application with a psalm like this, missing the true hope that the psalm means to provide.

And when we do that, we sometimes are guilty of universally applying a psalm like this.
Attempting to give comfort to people that actually, even according to the Scriptures, have no right to these words. Even among unbelievers in the secular world, books have been written about how Psalm 23 has become a secular icon as far as Scriptures are concerned.
Even from those who want nothing to do with Christianity, they come to something like Psalm 23 and they try to seek comfort in it and they try to seek rest. But the truth is they have no right to these words.
There's no comfort for them here. As Christopher Ashe said, they are dangerous words. For this poem can nurture a false assurance and a misleading feeling of security.
[2:47] And that's what I want to try to help us sort out this morning. While Psalm 23 is for us, what I want to show you is that Psalm 23 is not actually about us.

It's for us. It's not about us. So before we too quickly move to this personal application in our attempts to find comfort in our grief, which we can find here.
But before we jump too quickly there, we want to see what is this Psalm actually about? What is it that David intended for us to see here? What is it that God means for us to understand?
Because it's only when we grasp this fact and trust the Lord on the basis of it that this amazing Psalm will actually truly bring us comfort.
So I want to show you who this Psalm is actually about so that you will know whether or not these words are actually for you. And whether or not the comfort you feel from them is legitimate.
[3:52] Let's read it together. A Psalm of David. The Lord Yahweh is my shepherd. I shall not one.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in 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.
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. Amen. David, of course, is the author of the Psalm, which is a note that always matters.

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[5:00] Whenever we're studying through the Psalm, if it's from David, we know that there is a certain significance to it that we need to pay attention to. And that's what we've been trying to do as we're marching through the Psalms together.

And we know that as a boy, David worked as a shepherd. So it's no surprise that he would at some point write a Psalm just like this one that uses this kind of imagery of a shepherd who leads and cares for and protects his sheep.
And I want you to remember that when we come to Psalm 23, David didn't write Psalm 23 as a shepherd. David wrote Psalm 23 as a king.
Now, shepherding is a common metaphor for leadership, particularly in the Bible. Husbands are shepherds of their homes. Pastors are shepherds of their congregations.
And in the ancient world, a king was called the shepherd of his people. So if we step back and we just kind of examine the big picture of David's life, we find that as a boy, David is a keeper of sheep.
[6:06] He's a shepherd in the fields. That foreshadowing how he will become a shepherd in Israel and a king. We read in 2 Samuel 5, 2, And the Lord said to David, You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.

We read again in Psalm 78, 70, and 71, He chose David, his servant, to take him from the sheepfolds, from that early life in the fields, from following the nursing news.
He brought him to shepherd Jacob, his people, the nation of Israel, his inheritance. But still, David did not write Psalm 23 from the perspective of a shepherd king.
Though he writes it as a king, he's not writing from the perspective of a shepherd king. He's writing rather from the perspective of a sheep. He's a sheep here.
As the shepherd of Israel, David tells us, A greater shepherd cares for him. A greater shepherd cared for the king.
[7:21] And this contemplation is evident in how personal the psalm reads. Maybe as David sat and he thought about his years in the fields of Bethlehem, maybe as he's thinking about his role as the shepherd of Israel, he declares, Yahweh is my shepherd.

I may be a shepherd for them, but he is my shepherd. And with him, I lack nothing. Some of you will remember Mr. and Mrs. Kuo, a Taiwanese couple.
He was a pastor for many years that attended our church for a few years. And one day he came and he gave me a gift. It was a, he used Chinese calligraphy and he had written it all in Chinese.
I had no idea what it was and he wouldn't tell me what it was. He said, I was just going to have to try to figure it out. So I took it home and got Google Translate so I could figure it out. And it was Psalm 23.1. And I loved the translation of it.
What it said is the Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. I lack nothing. With him, I lack nothing that I need. He is all that I need, David says.
[8:30] And this is an important note because it helps us to see that the Psalm, it's not first about God shepherding Israel, though it is about that.

We'll get to that. It's not first about that. It's about how God shepherds his king. Israel's blessing came through David's blessing.
And that's how they would have understood Psalm 23 as they lifted it up in worship together. James Johnston writes, By watching over David, God was watching over all Israel.
The life of the people was bound up in their king. When David prospered, the nations prospered. So Psalm 23 is about God caring for his people by caring for their king.
But we have to go one step further if we're going to truly grasp the significance of Psalm 23. Finally, we must recognize that David writes ultimately as a prophet, not just a king, not just a shepherd, not just a sheep, but as a prophet, pointing to the greater shepherd king, the promised Davidic king, the promised son, the Christ, Messiah.
[9:51] Jesus is who David writes about here. Just as David's time shepherding foreshadowed his years as king, so does his kingship foreshadow the future Davidic king and Messiah that was promised in God's covenant with David.

And this becomes especially clear when we consider the tapestry into which Psalm 23 is woven in the book itself. And we need to just think about where we've gone through what now?
Eight psalms this summer. Eight in a row. Have you noticed a theme in this collection, in this section of the psalms? Over and over and over, it's the same thing, isn't it?

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It's about a king. It's about the king's trust in his God. It's about God's blessing of the king. It's about the suffering of the king and God's subsequent salvation and deliverance of that king again and again and again and again.
And here comes Psalm 23. And it's not positioned here in the psalms by coincidence. David positions it here on purpose. He's writing about something bigger than him, about someone greater than him.
[11:04] He's reflecting on God's covenant. And he's writing about that coming king and how his life foreshadows the life of that king.

All of these psalms in this section, they've been about God's care for and deliverance of the Christ. And Psalm 23 is no exception. It's about Jesus, the Lamb of God, slain for our sins, about the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep.
It's about how Yahweh shepherded King Jesus so that through him, all who hear his voice and follow him will receive the blessings of this psalm.
God shepherds his people through his king. Our life is bound up in his. His blessing is our blessing. So if we're going to receive comfort from Psalm 23, we have to understand first, who's the psalm really about? And that's what I want to show you. Revelation 7, 17, I think, confirms this as does many other passages.
[12:14] John writes, For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

God has shepherded his king, and through that, he shepherds us. The psalm, then, it displays the faithfulness of God who cares for his king in order that he might bless his people.
And there's five areas that God shepherded the king in the psalm, five areas that Jesus shepherds his sheep. So we want to hold those two things in tension as we go through.
It's a picture of how God faithfully shepherds his king, and it's also a picture there subsequently of how Jesus, the good shepherd, shepherds his people.
Number one, God satisfies him with restful pasture. God satisfies him with restful pasture. Look at verse 2.
[13:18] David declares, He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.

He restores my soul. A good shepherd, he leads the sheep to pleasant pasture where they can be refreshed, properly cared for. And the words that David uses here in the psalm, they all point toward and emphasize this idea of rest, which is an important motif in the Bible.
Just look at the verse again. We have, He makes me lie down in green pastures, pastures of rest, where after a long day of travel and toil, the sheep can find a place to be replenished.
He leads me beside still waters, literally beside waters of rest. It's a picture, a meadow. And here's the waters of the meadow. And what is it that the shepherd is providing for his sheep in this meadow?
Rest. Third, we see, He restores my soul. Again, refreshment. He returns to life is what the word means.
[14:28] Restores. As a shepherd satisfies the sheep with restful pastures after a long day, God satisfies his king with all that he needs as he toils through this life.

And boy, did David have some toil in his life, didn't he? Twice. At least twice. He's on the run for his life. He's anointed king, but he has to leave.
First, it's Saul that's chasing him. Later on in his life, it's his own son that's chasing him. That's toil. That's hard. And in the midst of that, what is David doing? He's being shepherded by his God.
God is providing for him all that he needs to shepherd his people. That provision of restful pasture then comes to his people through the king.
But notice that the rest provided by God is for the king's soul. He restores my soul. He replenishes my soul.
[15:29] He returns my soul to life, we might say. So then an application, a physical provision here is superficial, shallow.

The rest here is ultimately spiritual rest. It's peace. And David's intent is to communicate that God causes him, literally makes me lie down.
He causes me to be refreshed of soul. He provides in himself all that is necessary to meet David's deepest needs.

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And he does it in abundance. He does not withhold. He does not withhold himself from his king. He restores him and replenishes him and gives him rest for his soul.
And so it was with Christ in his life on this earth. Jesus lives with very little material provision. And yet the father satisfies his soul again and again in the gospels.
[16:34] Providing all that he needed for an abundant life. He blesses his king. He shepherds his king. He gives him himself. And this is what Jesus, the good shepherd, offers to sinners like you and me.

Rest for our souls. Bread so that we will never hunger again. Water so that we will never again thirst. Life and life abundant.
That's what our good shepherd does for us. That's what the green pastures and the still waters and the refreshment of soul. That's what it is. It comes to us through Jesus.
It is the provision of Jesus himself who meets every need that we have. Matthew 11, Jesus says, come to me.
All who labor and are heavy laden. Laboring through this life. Doing your best. Trying your hardest. Spinning your wheels.
[17:36] Jesus says, come to me and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I'm gentle and lowly like a good shepherd.

And you will find rest, he says, for your soul. For your soul. Again in John 10, which is a wonderful parallel passage to this.
Maybe this afternoon you'll sit and just read through John chapter 10. But Jesus says, I am the door of the sheep. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.
The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. But I came that they may have life and life abundantly. God satisfies his king with restful pasture.
And his king satisfies his people with rest. Rest for the soul. Second, God leads him on righteous paths.
[18:37] He leads him on righteous paths. Look at the second part of verse 3. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his namesake. So the imagery, it's moving.

Imagine you're in an art gallery. And the art gallery is going five different pictures in a row that follow the sequence of the psalm. And the first thing that we see is this beautiful picture of a pasture.
I mean, lush gardens. Verdant soil. Water where we can drink. All the places where we can be refreshed. And in the second picture, we have a path.
And we're being led down a path. Or the sheep is being led down a path by his shepherd. It's the path that the shepherd must lead his sheep on to actually get to the pastures.
That are green and the still waters that are so refreshing. We've seen this term paths in the psalms here just a few weeks ago. In Psalm 17 and verse 5, David says, My steps have held fast to your paths.
[19:38] My feet have not slipped. Now there, the paths referred to God's law and his commandments. David's commitment to obeying them. But here he doesn't mean it in the same way.

Here, the emphasis is on the character and trustworthiness of David's shepherd. It's not about the effort of the sheep to stay on the path.
It's about the character of the shepherd that takes him only on the right paths. God always leads his king on the right paths. God does so for the glory of his own name.
Proving his faithful reputation again and again and again. He always does what's right and he always leads his people in the way that they should go.
He leads according to his own perfect righteousness. Therefore, no matter how treacherous the path, the king can trust his shepherd and follow his God wherever he leads.
[20:42] Which is exactly what Jesus modeled for us. Over and over and over, walking treacherous paths. And yet, Jesus entrusts himself to the Father again and again and again in fullness of faith.

Knowing that the Father will lead him exactly where he must go. And if the people are to follow their king in faith, we read here that they will always be on God's righteous path.
Which leads to an abundance of life. So we've got the satisfaction, the rest of the green pastures, pleasant pastures. We have God leading his king on righteous paths.

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Third, we see that God comforts him through death's valley. God comforts him through death's valley. Look at verse 4. The sheep is at his darkest moment in verse 4.
The righteous path of God that we read in verse 3 does not mean the absence of danger. And in this case, the danger is not merely the threat of death.
[22:08] It is the inevitability of death. The right path. The righteous path. The good path. Leads the king directly and intentionally to his death.

And yet the sheep of Psalm 23 cries out to the Lord, I will fear no evil. The same king who in Psalm 22 cries out in the agony of death, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
In Psalm 23 declares that he's not afraid. Even as he goes through the agony, even as he goes through the valley of death, he's not afraid.
But how can this be? Because his shepherd walks through the valley with him. He doesn't send him through the valley.
He goes with him. He is comforted by the presence and the power of his God who he knows will deliver him from this death.
[23:23] Which we were reminded of in Psalm 16 a few weeks ago. Where David wrote, Therefore my heart is glad. My whole being rejoices. My flesh also dwells secure.

For you will not abandon my soul to shield, to death. Or let your Holy One see corruption. What is this?
Why is this so important in Psalm 23? Because of what we just read in Psalm 22. The king comes to suffer.
The right path that his shepherd leads him on is the path to death and agony and shame.
And yet in the midst of it, he continues to entrust himself to him who judges justly. Knowing that beyond the death is a resurrection. This is the faithfulness of God.
[24:27] And the trust and faith of his king. So that the promise of this verse is the promise of resurrection. Which is why it is such a comfort to those who grieve, isn't it?

Says Spurgeon. Observe that it is not walking in the valley. But through the valley. We go through the dark tunnel of death and emerge into the light of immortality.
That's why this brings us comfort. Because we know that on the other side of our death, for those of us who are in Christ, is a resurrection.
Is life and life eternal. But we must first remember that this promise of resurrection belongs first and foremost to the king about which David writes.
It is Jesus who does not fear death. Because he knows the shepherd is with him. And will raise him up. And this is how Jesus becomes the good shepherd of John 10.
[25:35] Hear his words from John 10, 14 to 18. Jesus says, I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. Just as the father knows me and I know the father.

Do you see? The father leads the son. And the son shepherds his people. It's Psalm 23. And what does he go on to say?
And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also. And they will listen to my voice.
So there will be one flock and one shepherd. For this reason the father loves me, Jesus says. Because I lay down my life. That I may take it up again.
No one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down. I have authority to take it up again. And this charge I have received from my father.
[26:35] The shepherd raises the sheep. And the sheep trust him. The resurrection life of Jesus is how we can be confident.

Of our resurrection life ourselves. The blessing of Psalm 23 does not come to us directly. It comes to us through Jesus.
Our lives. Our resurrection. Is bound up in his. John 11. Jesus says again. I am the resurrection and the life.
Whoever believes in me. Though he die. Yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me. Shall never die. He says. Why is this important? Why is Psalm 23 a comfort to us?
Because in Psalm 23. God shepherds his king. He leads him to death. A substitutionary atonement for the sins of his people.
[27:36] And then he raises him up. And because he does that. We now have the confidence and assurance. That we too will come through death. And will be raised up by our good shepherd.

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To enjoy his life. Number four. God prepares him. An honored banquet. He prepares him an honored banquet.
Verse five. You prepare a table before me. In the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over. Now the shepherd becomes the host.
Because the king trusted and obeyed him from verdant pastures. On the right paths and through death's valley. God honors him.
With a celebratory banquet. God prepares a feast in the king's honor. And his enemies. Namely death and hell. Are present only as a display.
[28:38] Of their defeat. The vindication of the king. Through his resurrection. Is a public event. It's there for all to see.

And what is it that God does for his king. As his host. He lavishes his wealth on him. He anoints his head with oil. In this case that's not a reference to.
The anointing of oil from the temple. And the tabernacle in the Old Testament. This is a customary practice. Of an honored guest being brought into a home. And being perfumed in honor.
And in celebration. As the honorary guest of the host. That's what's happening there. He lavishes his wealth on him. He blesses him.
With overflowing abundance. My cup overflows. Who does it overflow to? Me and you. Me and you. The blessing of the king.
[29:41] Becomes our blessing. It's a feast for the ages. And it is ours only. In Christ Jesus. Number five.

God assures him. Of his eternal home. He assures him. Of his eternal home. Verse six. 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 is confidence here.
It's assurance. There's not a trace of doubt. But how is it that he communicates this assurance? That's what's so amazing about it. Goodness and mercy.
The terms he uses here in the beginning. They're pregnant with covenant significance. As we've seen again and again in these psalms. Haven't we? We've seen these kind of terms. Steadfast love of the Lord. The faithfulness of God.
[30:41] The goodness of God. The mercy of God. All of that is covenant language. God is fulfilling his covenant for his king. He's fulfilling his covenant through his king even.

David's assurance is based entirely then on God's faithfulness to his covenant promises. Which are fulfilled in Jesus.
How can he know for sure that he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever? He doesn't say I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever based on my ability to do my best and try my hardest.
Or based on my best to live a righteous life before my God. No. He says I am assured of my heavenly home because of the goodness and mercy of God.
Because of his faithfulness through his covenant. Because he made a promise and I know he will keep it. But notice how he frames it. It's so good here. I love how he describes his assurance.
[31:39] Notice this word follow. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. Follow this. Follow. Follow. Follow. The word behind this is typically used to describe a hostile enemy pursuing his target.

It's usually used negatively. David thinks of the goodness and the mercy of God like someone that's pursuing him. He's trying to get away but it's pursuing him and it's catching up to him.
He's the target. He's the target. What's he saying? God's goodness and mercy will pursue him all the way to heaven. Why?
Because the Lord is his shepherd. And the shepherd pursues the sheep to the end. And such is our assurance of eternal life with God.
It's not based on our pursuit of Jesus. It's based on Jesus' pursuit of us. Because he is our shepherd. We can rejoice with wonderful assurance of our eternal home.
[32:53] Goodness and mercy, the faithfulness of God, the promise of God, it pursues his people. We can't get away from it. How wonderful that is.

You know, if we rest the assurance of our salvation and the assurance of our eternity on anything in us, we will never have assurance. We'll never be righteous enough.

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We'll never have a strong enough faith to feel comfortable. We'll never do all the things that we think we need to do to feel confident of our salvation.
But that's not how the Bible talks about assurance. It doesn't talk about assurance in relationship to us and what we do. Our assurance rests entirely, solely on the faithfulness of God.
And the king tells us in Psalm 23, this covenant faithfulness, it pursues me. Even if I run, it's right on my heels.
[33:54] It's there. I can't get away from it. I can't get away from it. And so he says, I know. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Because the Lord is my shepherd.

How can you know that you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever? Because Jesus is your shepherd. And he pursues his sheep to the end.
He said clearly in John 10, The Father has given me my sheep. I will not lose even one of them, he says. Now that assurance is not based on the sheep's faithfulness.
It's based on the shepherd's faithfulness. How wonderful. Now I've tried to make clear, hopefully I have without overcomplicating the text.
But I've tried to make clear that Psalm 23 here is first and foremost about Jesus. It's written by David about Jesus for us.
[35:03] God, the Father, shepherded his son in all of these ways that we read in Psalm 23. That doesn't mean that the psalm isn't for us. It's just not about us.

But that's why it's truly a comfort. That's why we can't just skip over this. And move directly to some kind of personal application. No, we need to go through the process of thinking.
As we find comfort in Psalm 23. Why do I receive comfort from Psalm 23? I receive comfort from the psalm because of the Lord Jesus. Who is my shepherd?
And until we see that the song is fulfilled in Jesus, we cannot truly find comfort in its words. The blessing of it comes to us through him.
That's why I can say at the beginning. I wasn't meaning just to be provocative at the beginning. I just mean it sincerely. These words are not for everyone.
[36:01] Not every person in grief and in trouble can come to Psalm 23 and find the comfort that they hope to find. So how can we know if these words are for us?

We need to let Jesus answer that question. Again, in John 10. This time, verses 25 to 30. Jesus speaking to some Pharisees.
He says, I told you and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness about me. But you do not believe because you are not among my sheep, he says.
He says, my sheep hear my voice. And I know them. And they follow me. I give them eternal life. And they will never perish. And no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all. And no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.
[37:04] And I and the Father are one. What does he say? My sheep hear my voice. And I know them. And they follow me. How can we know if the words of Psalm 23 can bring us comfort today?

How do we know if they're words for us? The blessing of Psalm 23 is only for those who belong to Jesus' flock. He gives all his sheep eternal life that cannot and will not be taken away.
But how do I know if Jesus is my shepherd? How do you know if Jesus is your sheep? Well, Jesus gives us the test.
Two of them. My sheep hear my voice. And they follow me. You want to know how you can, whether or not you can receive comfort from Psalm 23?
Do you hear his voice? Do you follow him? That is, do you believe him? Are you trusting him?
[38:08] And have you turned from sin and self to follow him as the shepherd of your life? Many people have taken a false comfort in Psalm 23.

They want to believe that God is their shepherd, but they do not want to listen to Christ. Neither do they follow him. None of the blessings come to us except through Jesus.
Christ is the great shepherd for God's people. And if you do not belong to Jesus, God is not your shepherd. And there is no comfort for you here.
But if you know Jesus and you love him, Psalm 23 is for you. And the good thing about it is that Jesus issues this call.
We read it in Matthew 11 a moment ago. It wasn't a call simply to an exclusive number of people. It's a call that he issues to everyone. He says, come to me all who labor and are heavy laden.

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[39:18] I will give you rest. That's your call. You want comfort from Psalm 23? Come to Jesus. He invites you. All that the Father gives me will come to me, he says.

And whoever comes to me, I will never cast out. You say, how do I come to him? Believe him. You trust him.
Confess your sin. Repent. And follow him. And he will be your shepherd. And you will hear his voice.
And as you follow him, you will find more comfort in Psalm 23 than you could have ever imagined.
And if you know him, if you know him, if you know him,