

Psalm 23

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0:00] Amen. Friends, while you're standing, let's pray.! Heavenly Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening?! In Christ's name, amen.

It's a psalm of trust. It's a psalm that says, God, you look after your people.

It's not a psalm of asking. It's a psalm of trusting. The psalmist doesn't just sort of say, doesn't just say that, doesn't just say, just trust.

He paints these two pictures for us. A picture of a shepherd and a picture of a host. So let's look at them one by one. Let's start with the first image.

God as shepherd. Verse 1. The Lord is my shepherd. And before we get to the word shepherd there, I just want to look at the word my there, because there's a lot in that word my.

[1:19] That word says a lot. Now, one of the really interesting things about this psalm is there are 32 personal pronouns in Psalm 23. 32 personal pronouns in six verses.

It's mostly I, me, my, and you. So it's a very personal psalm. And notice there's no we in there. There's no we.

It doesn't appear in the psalm. There's no community words here. Now, we love community. Jordan talked about community. We love community. But David here is particularly thinking about the comfort of knowing that he has a personal relationship with God.

He's not speaking abstractly about God. He's speaking about his personal relationship with God. And this is not self-centered. Because there's the points in your life when you're going to be alone. You're going to go into hospital. Your family can't go with you. You're going to be whirled into surgery or something like that. And at that point, you don't want theories on God. You'll want a personal God. Now, of course, we don't want to be isolated in our lives.

[2:23] But you might find there will be points when we are isolated. And at that point, you want above to say, the Lord is my shepherd. It's my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd.

I'm laboring this a bit because I just think at St. John's, we're a little bit of a brainy bunch. And we live in this land of concepts and ideas and stuff. So this is a reminder that what Christ offers us is personal.

It's personal. It's personal. So right at the start of the psalm, David, he is not thinking about all of Israel. He is not thinking about all of God's people.

He's thinking about how good it is, how amazing it is, how astonishing it is that the creator of the universe is committed to him personally.

Now, I have these three children, these three kids. Sadie, Bea, and Ollie. They're at home online watching. Hello, children. There's a big difference between me saying, Ollie is a son.

[3:29] I mean, it's true. Ollie is a son. There's a big difference between saying that and saying, Ollie is my son. That's what the psalmist is going for. There's a big difference between saying, I know about God, and saying, I know God.

So verse one, the Lord is my shepherd. Okay, so what's the deal with the idea of a shepherd? The shepherd.

What's that about? The Bible uses lots of metaphors about who God is. Probably the biggest one is king, I think. But this is different. This is more, I use the word a million times already, personal, isn't it?

It's not detached. The shepherds are all in. The shepherds live with the sheep. They know the sheep's name. They put their body online for the sheep.

In this equation, obviously, we are the sheep. And the shepherd is very committed to the sheep. The shepherd is more committed to the sheep than the sheep is committed to the shepherd.

[4:34] That's important. That's important to remember. I mean, we throw around phrases like, Aberdeen, she's very committed, isn't she? She's a committed Christian. She's such a committed Christian, isn't she?

I've got to point out lots of people here. They're very committed Christians. It's not talking about that in the psalm, is it? It's talking about how committed the shepherd is. I mean, think about it.

You go out to Fraser Valley and you drive past some random farm and there's all these sheep there and they're frolicking about. They look really well fed. They look happy. They're eating. They're doing sheepy stuff.

You don't think, goodness, those sheep. Gee, they're committed, aren't they? Look at how committed these sheep are. Well done.

Well done, sheep. You don't think that. You think, man, what an awesome farmer. What an awesome farmer those sheep have. What an awesome shepherd. What a committed shepherd they have.

[5:31] That's what David's trying to get across here. That's the right way to view this. I mean, you've got bad days. You have good days. You've got bad days. On your worst day, behavior, attitude, whatever it is, on your worst day, the good shepherd is no less committed to you than on your best day.

Because the shepherds are all in, aren't they? The Lord is all in on you. Okay, let's keep going here. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

What does that mean? It doesn't mean we don't have wants. It doesn't mean our problems disappear. But isn't it wonderful to know we have a shepherd who knows you personally, who knows what you need, knows what you need, knows your weaknesses, and is committed to your good.

But what does that exactly look like? And that's what I think verses two to four are about. This is when it talks about he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He refreshes my soul.

Let's dig into those details a little bit here. He leads me to green pastures. This is what the shepherd does. So the ancient Near East was pretty rocky, pretty sparse.

[6:40] But there are these patches. There are these green pastures. The shepherd takes the sheep to those places where they can be fed, where they can be nourished.

And they lie down. He makes me lie down in these green pastures. Sheep lie down when they feel safe. When they know that the shepherd is good.

And they're in a safe place. And they're in a place where they can be nourished. That's an awesome feeling. Feeling safe in the world. Feeling like everything's going to be okay.

And I feel like maybe that's not everyone's experience though, is it? Even Christians. I think part of that is because we do a lot of striving. Trying to make things happen.

And that's exhausting. Always feeling like you're kind of trying to grind something out. All these decisions ahead of you. Oh, if I don't mess up my whole life, make one bad decision. You know. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

[7:45] This is what the Lord wants to do for you. He wants to give you soul rest. He wants to put you in places. He wants your heart to be in a place where you're thinking, Do you know what?

The shepherd's looking after me. Even though there's uncertainty. I know it's going to be okay. I'm the youngest of five children.

And I was the first in my family to go to high school. To finish high school, sorry. To complete high school. It was a big feat. I was the first in my family to go to university and get a degree.

And I worked very hard for it. And I remember thinking, as a young man, thinking, Man, when I... I didn't know anyone that had ever gone to university before. And I remember thinking, as a young man, thinking, Man, if I...

Once I get my bachelor's degree, Man, I'll be somebody. You know? Like, I'll be somebody. I'll matter. Like, I'll count.

[8:47] There's a great scene in the movie Rocky from 1976. It's a brilliant movie. So Rocky... It's a boxing movie, right? This is a boxing movie. Rocky's talking to his girlfriend, Adrian, And having this conversation.

And it's the night before he fights Apollo Creed. He's the world champion. And Rocky says this, It really don't matter if I lose this fight. It really don't matter if this guy opens up my head either.

Because all I want...

All I want to do is go the distance. Nobody's ever gone the distance with Creed. If I can go the distance, you see, And that bell rings and I'm still standing, I'm gonna know for the first time in my life That I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood.

If I can go the distance, I'll know I'm not a bum. See, Rocky's putting this thing ahead of him And he's like, Man, if I can do that, I've justified my existence.

He doesn't even have to win. He's just trying to prove himself that he is worthy. And that's how I felt about education. And I think because education had a low emphasis in my family.

[9:53] Even when I even went to Regent, actually. When I went to Regent, actually. And I remember thinking, Man, if I can get a certain GPA, If I can just rock a certain GPA, And I knew exactly what I wanted.

If I can get that, I will be officially intelligent. And I got it. And I got it. And nobody cares. No one cares.

No one's ever asked me. It's just a little piece of paper In a filing cabinet somewhere. I mean, it's so stupid, isn't it? What a stupid way to think. What a stupid way to think about life.

But we do it. We do it because we just, We don't feel safe. We don't feel worthy. We don't feel loved. Whatever it is that you have to do in your life To think that you matter.

It's like if I get into the right university, If I get the right marks, If I have a successful career, If I have a family, If I get married, Or if people admire me. It's a rough way to live.

[11:03] You'll never feel at rest. You'll never feel safe. You'll never feel like you matter. You'll never make it. A good shepherd, That's not his plan for your life. That's a terrible way to live. He wants to take you to the green pastures Where you can lie down.

And you know, Everything's going to be okay. Because the good shepherd's there. The shepherd's there. He's going to look after me. You're okay. Friends, You're in Christ. It's going to be alright. You're in Christ. Okay, still waters. What's one of the other lines here? Another beautiful picture. He leads me beside still water. What's the still waters about?

Or quiet waters. It's just, If you take a sheep to a fast, You don't want to take a sheep To a fast moving body of water Like a rabbit. Because they'll fall in And they'll drown Or they'll get scared. So the shepherd knows The places that are just right.

Where they will drink. And they'll be nourished. This is what the good shepherd Wants to do for you. This is what the Lord Wants to do for you. He wants to take you To places like this. Verse 3, It says, He restores my soul.

[12:05] I really love that line. COVID was brutal For lots of different professions In the world. Pastoring was one of those professions That it was brutal for.

Research at the time said That 33% of pastors Seriously considered Leaving the ministry During COVID. And I didn't feel that way.

But towards the end of it, I did feel like I was losing my mind. And the church Was very gracious And gave me a sabbatical. A three month sabbatical. This is four years ago.

And this line, Verse 3 of Psalm 23, He restores my soul. That was my verse For my sabbatical. That was all I could manage. It was one verse. And I would pray it every day.

Lord, restore my soul. And he did. The Lord restored my soul. So, This is what the Good Shepherd Wants for us.

[13:07] I'll give you this example Because I don't want you to think I'm just kind of like Saying words. Do you know what I mean? I'm just like saying words. Filling some space in the service.

Tickling your brain theologically. Some interesting ideas. I just want to remind you that This is what the Lord wants for you.

The Lord can heal you. Perhaps you're feeling really Jittery about your life. Really out of sorts. Really anxious about a whole lot of things.

The Lord wants to heal you. This is, That's what he does. It's not just words here. He restores my soul.

Maybe you could pray that for yourself. Every day. Maybe that's all you can manage right now. Give a little, The chance to do that for you. Now we get to verse 4 though.

[14:09] There's a bit of a change of direction here. As I said at the start, Doesn't mean that everything goes nicely In your life though. Because here we have The valley of the shadow of death.

So sheep, With the analogy, In the analogy, This is the picture, right? You've got sheep, One place. You need to take them somewhere else. And they have to go for a journey To get to this other place. Sometimes that journey's Through sketchy territory.

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. Comfort me.

So, This valley of the shadow of death, This could be, It could be a lot of things. It could be depression. It could be grief. It could be medical crisis. It could be The loss of a relationship. It could be The loss of a dream. Maybe your life doesn't look like You thought it should. It could be death itself. The psalm doesn't say We get to avoid this stuff.

[15:12] We have to go through it. We go through the valley Of the shadow of death. But the promise here Is not we get to avoid it. The promise here Is that The shepherd will be with you. Not in front of you.

Not behind you going, Go for it. It says here, You are with me. You are with me. And the shepherd has a staff To guide you And a rod To defend you.

It's like a cudgel. Like a mace. The Lord is ready To defend you. And the Lord has probably Defended you In many ways in your life And you had no idea It was happening.

So a family blow up Or a sickness Or a death God is with you Guiding you And defending you. And if it is death Jesus will take you Safely through it.

There's a little story I read this week I'm going to read it to you About A man who was Widowed Early And he just He just wrote a couple Of paragraphs About his experience here Driving back from the funeral Mr Barnhouse Was on his way home From the funeral Of his wife And was trying to think Of some way Of comforting his children Just then A huge moving van Passed their car And its shadow Swept over them Instantly Mr Barnhouse Asked children Would you rather Be run over By a truck Or by its shadow The children Instantly replied By its shadow Daddy Its shadow To which Mr Barnhouse Replied Children Two thousand years ago The truck of death Ran over The Lord Jesus Christ But your mummy Only had to pass Through Its shadow David the psalmist Knew this all too well And he penned the words Of Psalm 23 Yea though Walk through the valley

[17:01] Of the shadow Of death I will fear no evil For thou art with me And so we walk Through the valley Of the shadow of death And Jesus says Have no fear I am with you How can this be Because he took the truck So that we get the shadow For the believer The valley of death Is but A shadow Okay So we've been talking About this first big picture King David uses To describe the care That God has for us I'll summarize it like this You matter to God You matter to God He has invested He has taken Personal responsibility For you God Takes personal Responsibility For you And that means It's going to be okay You don't have to panic You can keep going Now let's move To the next section We talked about The imagery

Of the good shepherd And we'll look Very very quickly Now just This last image Of the picture Of God As host You prepare A table Before me It's verse 5 In the presence Of my enemies You anoint my head With oil My cup overflows Surely Goodness and love Will follow me All the days Of my life And I will dwell In the house Of the Lord Forever So what's the Kind of the picture Being painted here It's quite interesting Actually It's like You go on a journey You're travelling From one place You're going To a friend's house Let's say it's a small town Visit a friend's Small town And let's say You've caused a bit Of trouble In that small town In the past People don't like you But you're going To visit your friend's house You go into the house The community hears That you're in Your friend's house That you're there And they stand around The house And they hate you They hate you And you can look Out the window And you can see them I hate you I hate you I hate you And what does your friend do He doesn't say

Listen You should probably go This is Too much heat This is going to go sideways You should probably leave Out the back door Hide somewhere No the friend is like So good to see you This is fantastic I made a really nice dinner I made a really nice dinner For you I'm really glad you're here First let me anoint you With oil Which is like A Ancient thing That people did And he goes Let me get you a drink As well Let me pour you a drink Pause the drink Just falling out of the glass It's just over the top Here we go Get into it You know The host wants you there Your friend wants you there Despite all those people Hating you The host loves having you In their home That's the picture David wants to put in our mind When we think about The kind of welcome We get from God Of course you'd want to dwell In that house Wouldn't you?

Wouldn't you want to stay In that house? What a great image What a great image To burn into your brain I think it's good We sort of draw these lines In the sand And we tell ourselves This is how God feels about me In the midst of life's dramas And you come to God And you ask yourself How is God going to receive me?

I can tell you He doesn't roll his eyes Have you ever had people Ask you to do something Just as you've been working Really hard And you've just sat down Hey can you just do This one thing for me?

[20 : 32] And you're like God's not like that When you know High maintenance Aaron Comes to the Lord And whining about something God's not overwhelmed He's not thinking Aaron We talked about this Literally yesterday We've talked about this In the past Come on No It's like Oh it's great to have you It's great to have you In my home That's how the Lord Thinks about you Don't surrender that belief Don't Don't listen to your insecurities Don't be cynical about God This is how the Lord Welcomes you Isn't that a great picture That David gives us?

Verse 6 Surely goodness and mercy Shall follow me All the days of my life The follow me That word In the original language Literally is the word For an animal Hunting its prey David is saying He's saying He's writing this He's writing this psalm And he's saying I am confident That God's care for me Will pursue me My whole life Will pursue me Doggedly Without ceasing With absolute focus God's goodness Is going after you What a wonderful Thing to know What a wonderful Thing to keep Reminding yourself of It's no surprise This is our finish here It is no surprise That Jesus Picks up on these themes In Psalm 23 In John 10 Our reading He says I am the good shepherd The shepherd That David's talking about

That's me Who lays down His life for the sheep In Luke 15 He says I am the shepherd Who goes after The wandering sheep And here's the reason That death is now A shadow Because he went Through it first And you remember When Jesus dines With sinners He's saying to them I love you I accept you I love you Come to me And there's all Those other people Around Scornfully Mocking that situation Hating them So in Christ We have the good shepherd And the generous host Who has come To be with us Isn't that brilliant You can trust your life Into his hands Amen