

The All-Sufficient Shepherd

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. It's good to be with you all this morning, whether here in the sanctuary or on the live stream at home.

Our sermon text today is Psalm 23, so let's go there together. The words will be on the screen here in the sanctuary, but let me encourage you to have the text in front of you too if you brought a Bible or on your phone or at home.

Have the text open in front of you if you can. Let me pray for us, and then I'll read Psalm 23. Our Father in heaven, we pray that as we come to your word now, you would do what you promised, that you would send forth your word to accomplish all the purposes that you have for it, and that you would cause the growth and life and flourishing of your people as you have promised.

Lord, we look to you for a life-giving word today. In Jesus' name, amen. Psalm 23, a Psalm of David.

The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

[1 : 20] He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his namesake. 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. Lord forever. Well, one of the things that I really enjoy, especially on a chilly fall weekend like this, is a good cup of coffee.

Now, you know, coffee is a good thing, but it has its pros and cons, right? On the pro side, coffee is warm. It's caffeinated.

It tastes good. Although some of you might disagree with the tasting good part. But of course, coffee is not everything. Coffee is not the most nutritious thing in the world, right?

[2 : 32] So not long ago, Starbucks released a coffee that they called Starbucks Essential Vitamins, which, as their website says, is specially crafted with vitamins and biotin to help keep your body running at its best.

Now, I have never tried that vitamin supplemented coffee before. I think it's a bit ridiculous. I laughed out loud when I first heard about it. But it's kind of an interesting case, isn't it?

We know that coffee really isn't enough to keep our body running at its best. So we try to add something to it. We try to put something in there that might make it better for us.

You know, we really know that coffee is not sufficient. So we need to kind of bulk it up a little bit. Now, here's the thing. I wonder if many of us can fall into the same mindset spiritually.

We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good, that it's necessary. But I wonder if at the end of the day, we can have a sneaking suspicion that it might not be totally sufficient for all of our soul's needs.

[3 : 51] I wonder if we feel like we still need something a little more to be okay. You know, as believers in Jesus, we know that we need Christ for our sins to be forgiven.

But what about when we're weary? Is Jesus enough for us when we're weary? What about when we're afraid? Is he enough then?

What about when we're afflicted? Is he enough? Or sometimes do we kind of treat Jesus a little bit like a good coffee drink?

He's tasty. He's energizing. I need him to wake up in the morning. But I might still need some other essential vitamins somewhere else. Now, Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 begins with this radical statement. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

[4 : 46] Now, when David says, I shall not want, he means that he has everything he needs. He lacks nothing. The Lord is the utterly sufficient shepherd of his soul.

That's the big idea of this familiar psalm. Because the Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing my soul truly needs.

Psalm 23 is a meditation on the all-sufficiency of our good shepherd. Now, can we say that today? That's why Psalm 23 is here.

It's helping us not just to say that, but even more to experience that reality as good news. So, this morning, what I want to do is I want to just follow the course of this psalm and kind of enter into that experience that it lays out for us.

And to help us see what it means to say, the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. And the first thing that we see as the psalm opens up is that the Lord is sufficient for our weary souls.

[6 : 03] The Lord is sufficient for our weary souls. We see this in verses 2 and 3. Let me read those again. 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 namesake. Now, it was a common thing in the ancient world for a king to be referred to metaphorically as a shepherd because kings were seen as the leaders and protectors of their people.

And we see that same metaphor at work in the Bible, too. You know, ultimately, not just Israel's kings, but because God is king, God is sometimes seen as the ultimate shepherd and talked about that way.

But, you know, here in Psalm 23, David is sort of taking that common metaphor and he's pushing into it. He's really exploring it. He's slowing down and meditating on what it might really mean to say that the Lord is our shepherd.

And as David begins that meditation, we're sort of taken out to the countryside, aren't we? There we are. We are sheep in a flock. And David says, the Lord, our God, is making us lie down like sheep in green pastures.

[7 : 16] And he's leading us beside gently flowing fresh water. And he's guiding us along paths of righteousness, which means something like the right path, the straight path, the path where we're going to be safe.

And what's the sort of understood need there of us sheep? Well, as sheep, we get hungry, right? And we get thirsty. And we get confused.

And we get misdirected. And sometimes we even get lost. In other words, we get weary. But the shepherd, David says, knows how to restore us.

He restores my soul. Now, David, of course, had firsthand experience of all of this. He spent many of his early years, before he became the king of Israel, literally tending sheep, being a shepherd. But David also knew what it was like to be weary. David knew what it was like to be that metaphorical sheep, to be thirsty and hungry and tired.

[8 : 23] How about us? How about you? I wonder if you've ever felt that kind of just soul weariness.

Like you're thirsty, but when you drink, it doesn't go away. Or you're hungry, but when you eat, that kind of gnawing feeling is still there. Or you feel sometimes like your life is just wandering in circles and you're trying to find the right path.

Now, of course, when we're feeling physically weary, sometimes the best thing we need to do is just take a nap, right? Get some sleep.

Or when we're feeling relationally weary, sometimes we need to call up a friend. Or sometimes we need to take a break from people and spend some time in solitude. But what about when you feel like your soul is weary?

When that center of you that kind of connects to every part of you, when that's feeling weary, where do you turn? I think most of us know that feeling.

[9 : 23] And I think most of us know that we have some things that we try to do to make that weariness go away. Sometimes we look to friends. Sometimes we just zone out and, you know, start listening to music.

And sometimes those things help, right? But do they restore your soul? Do you remember that time in Jesus' ministry when he was out in the field and he was teaching the crowds?

And then evening started to come. And the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people that were there, they started to get hungry. And then what happens? The disciples start to get a little

nervous, right?

And they say, Lord, send these people home. There's no way we have enough food for them. This is going to get out of control here in a second. And then what does Jesus say to the disciples? Does he say, oh man, you're right. I totally lost track of time. We got to get these people home. Send them back. We don't have enough food for them. No, what does he do? He has them all sit down on the green grass, Mark says, in the Gospel of Mark.

[10:35] Jesus takes a little meal and he blesses it. And then miraculously, the good shepherd feeds every single weary soul that had gathered.

And there's baskets left over. He's showing them. He's showing us that we don't need to search anywhere else to find the restoration that our weary and hungry souls need.

We need to only come to the all-sufficient shepherd of our souls. Because here's the good news, friends. God created your soul, your life.

He created it. He made it. He surely knows how to restore it. If my car were broken down and someone just wandered down the street and said, I could try to fix it, I would not believe them. But if he said, no, I actually designed that car and I made it, I would be like, oh great, here's my toolbox. Have fun. Fix the thing. This is what it's like when we come to God. He made your soul.

[11:42] Surely, he's the one who can restore your soul. And that promise that he makes in this first part of Psalm 23 to restore our souls, David says that's a promise as good as God's own name.

Verse 3 says that he does all of this for his name's sake. Now, what does that mean? In the Bible, God's name refers to his revealed character.

He shows us who he is, his name. But it also refers to his public reputation. So, in other words, this promise that God will restore our souls, it's a good promise.

And it's based on the fact of who he is and the fact that he deserves glory. It's a promise as good as his character and as his fame.

He will do it. So, practically then, when our souls are weary, what should we do? What are the means at our disposal so that we can actually commune with our shepherd to be led and to be fed and to be restored by him?

[12:55] Well, there are ways of doing that together as sheep. After all, when God saves us as sheep, we become part of a flock, right?

So, part of communing with our shepherd happens together. And those are sort of the corporate or the congregational or the gathered, what are sometimes called means of grace. Ways of experiencing God together.

So, how do we do that together? We do that through things like worship and prayer and reading scripture together, taking the Lord's Supper. What we're doing right now together and virtually at home.

But there are also what we might call individual means of grace. Things that we do personally, privately. Things like meditation on scripture.

Things like spending silence before God. Things like private prayer to God. You know, these aren't just sort of things you have to tick to be okay spiritually or to be a good Christian.

[13:56] No, they're means, they're avenues of restoring your soul. So, the next time you feel weary, rather than scrolling on your phone or streaming the next episode of a show.

Not that there's anything wrong with those things. But when your soul's feeling weary and you feel yourself going to those forms of kind of cheap rest. Instead of turning to those things, turn to scripture.

Find a quiet place where you can quiet your heart in silence. And read God's word slowly.

And remember that God is present to you in glory and in love. We live very distracted lives. Taking time from our day and slowing down and being quiet is utterly essential to communing with our shepherd.

Especially in our distracted world. And in those moments we can tell him our concerns and our needs and our preoccupations. And the passage that's before us.

[15:04] Maybe we just choose a short passage from the gospels. Let that passage before you speak. Let the truths that you see there comfort you and support you. Let the promises be comfort and joy for you.

Let the commands that you see there be the paths of righteousness along which your shepherd wants to guide you. Listen to God. Listen to God. Rest. Breathe.

Pray. Lie down in the green pastures. Sit beside the still waters. Jesus has promised to be with us by his Holy Spirit.

He's promised to restore your weary soul. And it's a promise as good as his name. So that's the first thing that Psalm 23 shows us.

That the Lord is sufficient for our weary souls. But the Psalm starts to go further. And it shows us that the Lord isn't just sufficient for our weary souls. But verse 4 goes on to say that the Lord is sufficient for our fearful souls.

[16:07] Let me read verse 4 again. 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.

So David is sticking here with his extended meditation on the metaphor of the Lord as our shepherd. And as the journey of the sheep with the shepherd through the wilderness continues, the path has now grown dark. Into the valley of the shadow of death.

The path leads. Now that's a Hebrew turn of phrase that means something like the dark valley of darkness. It's as dark as it gets. And this darkness makes us afraid.

Life doesn't just make us weary. It also makes us fearful. Because there are dangers. And there are unknowns.

And there are things out of our control. And lingering behind them all is sort of the greatest darkness of all. That lingering darkness of death.

[17:12] And the question is, is our shepherd enough when we are afraid? When death and its many faces comes around, as the darkness descends, you know, the death of a job that you thought you had.

The death of a relationship that you thought was going to be with you. The death of a dream that you had been dreaming for ages. Or even when literal, physical death itself stares you in the face. Is the Lord sufficient for us?

Or do we need to run somewhere else? You know, David knew what it was like to be afraid. Most of his young life, he was on the run from Saul.

Being constantly hunted down in the wilderness. And, you know, imagine the fears that he had when he actually became king. Imagine an entire nation looking at you for leadership and strength and wisdom and protection.

That's enough to make you a little afraid, isn't it? And then at the end of his life, he faced the fear of his whole household collapsing under the rebellion of his son Absalom. Which drove David again out into the wilderness.

[18:22] Just where he had begun. David knew what it was like to walk through the dark valley of darkness. The valley of the shadow of death.

And yet, David can write here in Psalm 23, I will fear no evil.

No danger will I fear. Why? For you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Now notice at this moment, at this moment in Psalm 23, notice what just happened.

Up until this point in the Psalm, we've been talking about God, right? He leads me. He guides me. But now, what are we doing? We're talking to God. You're with me.

And you know, meditation, thinking and sitting deeply with Scripture is like that. We begin thinking about God. And then we end up communing with God and talking to God. There's something really powerful happening here.

[19:23] And what is it that verse 4 points us to? What is the thing that helps us fear no evil when God is with us? Your rod and your staff.

They comfort me. What is that? Well, it's an image of God's strength, of his power, of his authority. The rod and the staff of a shepherd. Those were the, you know, the equipment that he had to protect the sheep from attack, from wolves, from lions.

But also to guide the sheep from straying off the path. The staff was the thing that brought them back when they were wandering far. So you see what David is saying here.

He's saying that there's no threat external or internal. Either an enemy from the outside or my own internal wandering and waywardness.

There's no threat outside of me or inside of me that can overwhelm God's power and authority for me. His rod and his staff. If the Lord is our shepherd, David is saying, then we must be safe.

[20:29] Safe even from death itself. Now that's a powerful statement. That we are safe even from death itself. After all, our good shepherd Jesus didn't just feed the weary crowds, did he?

But as we read earlier from John 10, he laid down his life for the sheep. You see, in the ancient world, this was the order of the day.

Kings were called shepherds. But when trouble came, what would happen? The king would muster up his armies and he would send out the sheep to go and die for the shepherd.

That's how it worked. But you see how the gospel is completely different. In the gospel, when trouble comes, when sin and death and hell rear their heads, what does the shepherd do?

He goes out and he dies. He dies for the sheep. We've all gone astray, Isaiah says. We're all like sheep that have gone astray.

[21 : 38] We're all sinners before a holy God. We're all headed towards death and destruction. But the Lord has laid on him, on Christ, the iniquity, the sins of us all.

You know, that's why Paul can say in the New Testament at the end of 1 Corinthians 15, almost in a taunt. Oh, death. In light of our Savior Jesus, where is your sting?

Then he goes on to say the sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. Now, that's some pretty dense theologizing in about four words, right?

But think about it. What has Jesus done for us that takes the sting out of death? Well, the Lord came. And in his perfectly righteous life, he fulfills the law of God for the sheep.

And at the end of his life, he lays down his life to take the curse of the law, to pay the penalty of the law for our sins. So now that the law has been drained of its condemning power, sin is rendered powerless.

[22 : 48] Sin can no longer condemn us because Jesus has fulfilled the law for us. So sin has been drained of its power. And if sin has been drained of its power, then when we go to death, is there any sting left in death?

Because now not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Do you see what the shepherd has done? The one who holds the rod and the staff was willing to be struck so that we could be forgiven and face death without fear.

Whatever that death might be. So friends, what dark valley of darkness lies before you? What is it you're afraid of? Psalm 23 is saying that you have a sufficient shepherd who has walked the valley of death for you and come through the other side for you.

And he now holds his rod and his staff of authority to protect you and guide you all the way through that valley as well. He doesn't promise that the path will be easy, but he promises he will be with us and bring us home.

So Psalm 23 shows us the Lord's sufficiency, his all-sufficiency for our souls when they're weary and for our souls when they're fearful.

[24 : 19] But last, we see that the Lord is sufficient not just for our weary souls or our fearful souls, but for our afflicted souls. For our souls when they are afflicted. Let me read verses 5 and 6 again.

As Psalm 23 heads towards its conclusion and its climax, you notice here that the metaphors start to shift, don't they?

The pictures start to get a little different. The shepherd is now a host. And the sheep are now guests. And the fields and the valleys are traded for a home and a table and a cup.

And the present starts to look ahead to the future. You see, Psalm 23 is kind of taking us on this journey, isn't it? From the wilderness through the valley and finally back home.

And that story is actually as deep as the Bible itself, as all of human history. We lost our home in the garden and it's been a long road back.

[25 : 34] Isn't that the story of Israel in the Old Testament? After the Exodus, God liberates them from slavery. He leads them through the wilderness. Things get pretty dark. And yet He takes them all the way to their home, their dwelling place in the promised land.

And friends, that's the journey of the church in the New Testament. And that is the journey of every soul in Christ. He liberates us from sin. He leads us through the wilderness. And finally, He brings us home.

But, as Psalm 23 points out, there are many enemies along the way. Paul will say in Acts 14, it's through many afflictions that we must enter the kingdom of God.

But notice again what the Psalm says. You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies. Now, I have to confess to you, that image always struck me as a little odd.

The picture of sort of enemies looking on while God sort of has us at this table eating a meal together. That always seemed a little weird, a little weird mental picture.

[26 : 47] I didn't know what that was all about. But as I was studying this week, I ran across one commentator, one Bible scholar, who was talking about the next line. Talking about the line, You anoint my head with oil and my cup overflows.

And he was saying that the point of those verses is to say that we are honored guests at the Lord's table. You see, in the hot sort of desert climate of the ancient Near East, the guests of honor would be given sort of soothing oil for their dry skin.

They'd be anointed with oil. And their cups would be full of drink for them. And that's how they would be given honor. So you see, to say, to say that the Lord prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies is to say that the Lord is honoring us.

Even when all around us there are those who would seek our shame. Who would want to treat us with contempt. Who would love to see us stumble and fall. You see, despite all the voices around us, God says, You are my honored guest.

You know, honor, it's not a word that we use a whole lot in our culture anyway. But honor is something that we all long for. And it is something that we spend so much of our lives trying to get.

[28 : 16] Trying to get a name for ourselves. Trying to get an identity. Trying to get honor, right? Whether through our looks. Or through our peers and our friend group.

Or through our accomplishments. Is the Lord sufficient for us even there? Even in that troubled, afflicted place in our souls where we want to be seen and honored?

But look again at what Psalm 23 is sort of laying out before us. There's a table set with the finest of food.

The oil is ready. The cup is full. And you have to ask, Who are the ones? Who are the ones who get the honor of such an invitation? I mean, this is the party that every party wishes it could be, right?

Who are the lucky ones that get to be a part of that? Who has the honor of sitting at that table? And the psalm says, It's you. You're the ones.

[29 : 21] The Lord wants you to have this honor. In the gospel, in Christ Jesus, God has given you the right to become children of God. Sons and daughters of the King.

The one who has a name above every name has put his name on you and says, Come sit here with me. So when the enemies of your soul gather around and say, You're nothing.

You're not worth it. You'll amount to nothing. When your soul is afflicted by the voice of the accuser, the psalmist saying, Look to the table.

There's a card with your name on it. And underneath your name it says, Beloved, you will never be put to shame. And that means that you don't need anything else in this life to give you a name.

You don't need anything else in this life to grant you the honor your soul longs for. You know, good looks are fine. Friends are good. Accomplishments are nice.

[30 : 33] But look to the table, the psalm says. Even if you have none of those things, look at this table. The King of the universe has made you his own and you will dwell in his house forever.

So how do we conclude then? In verse 6, by the end of this psalm, David's meditation on the sufficiency of the shepherd gives him now the confidence to say that no matter what happens in this life, no matter what might make him weary, no matter what might make him afraid, no matter how many enemies may afflict and pursue him, there's one pursuit he is confident now that is going to outweigh them all.

The pursuit of the goodness and mercy of God that will chase after him all of his days. Surely, David says, goodness and mercy will follow me, will pursue me, will hunt me down all the days of my life.

And that is true for us too. We can look over our life to come with the confidence that we have everything we need in our good shepherd, the Lord Jesus.

restoration when we're weary, comfort and strength when we're fearful, honor when we're afflicted.

And this morning, today, we're literally going to look to the table as it were and be reminded of this by celebrating the Lord's Supper.

[32 : 14] Now, I know that during the pandemic we don't actually have a table, we've got these little cups, so you know, we're going to make our best of it. But the Lord's Supper, friends, is the table where we see the sufficiency of Jesus for us.

We get to see his body broken so that we can be made whole and we get to see his blood shed so that we could be made clean. And you know, as we take these elements in our hands, we can be reminded that just as these things are real, okay, I'm not sure this is actually real bread on the top of these little cups.

I'm just going to confess. But it's real, right? It's a thing. You can touch it. You can taste it. You can drink it. Just as this is a real thing, the Lord's Supper is telling us that the promises of Jesus are even more real.

To be with us always in this life. To lead us and to bring us home. And for those of us today who are believers in Jesus, the table is the time when we remember and when we celebrate all that Jesus has done for us.

And if you're at home joining on the live stream, grab some bread, grab some juice, and we'll do this together. But if you're here this morning or you're watching this morning and you haven't placed your trust in Jesus as your good shepherd, as your king and savior, then this moment is the time to do just that.

[33 : 42] this is the time to admit that you can't save yourself because none of us actually can. And to believe that what Jesus has done in your place is sufficient for you and to commit your life to him.

To step over the line, as it were, and respond to the king's invitation to join him at the table. Instead of taking bread, instead of taking the cup, take Christ himself in your heart through faith and know that Jesus is anyone who comes to me, I'll never cast out.

There's a place for you in the family. There's a place for you in the kingdom. Come and receive it. So as we prepare to look to the table then, I'm going to pray for us and then we'll sing a verse of a song together, meditating on what Jesus has done and then we'll partake of the Lord's supper together.

Let me pray. Lord Jesus, our good shepherd, we thank you for the bread and for the cup, for this table that you have set that reminds us of your deep and abiding love, that you have done everything that is necessary for us both now and for eternity.

Lord, strengthen our hearts as we partake together and worship you. Amen.