

Living with the Lord as Our Shepherd (Psalm 23)

Psalms: Pour Out Your Heart to Him

Zionsville Fellowship | August 10, 2025 | Drew Hunter

If people know of one text from the Old Testament, it's Psalm 23.

Many Christians memorize this text. Many hear it at funerals. Many turn to it in hardship.

Why? Because you cannot read this and not be calmed. It lowers our heartrate. It settles our anxieties. It gives us hope. It gives us a deep, inner calm at our core.

But this is not just a Psalm for funerals and hardship. It is for every season of life, every day, every moment.

King David wrote this Psalm to lead us to join him in praying this. This is about how God cares for us in all seasons of life, straight through to our eternal future.

We need this because we often struggle to trust God in different experiences.

In easy times, we tend to neglect him rather than recognize that he is providing us.
In hard times, we feel like we're all alone, not recognizing that he protects us.
We often view God as a distant ruler, but not a close and caring shepherd.

So, here is the main point of this Psalm: **Since the Lord is our shepherd, we can be confident in his presence, provision, and protection forever.**

Psalm 23

A Psalm of David

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
- 4 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.
- 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The main image of this Psalm is the Lord as our shepherd, and we are his sheep. And how does a shepherd care for sheep? With his presence, with his provision, and with his protection.

This psalm gives us five images to help us understand how God cares for us—a meadow, a path, a valley, a feast, and a home. So, we'll walk through each of those to see how his care for us calms our souls.

Here's what we'll see: He restores us in the meadow, he leads us on right paths, he protects us in the valley, he honors us with a feast, and he welcomes us into his home.

1. He Restores Us in the Meadow (v1-3a)

First, he restores us in the meadow.

The first verse introduces the whole Psalm. Everything flows from this. This is about who God is, and what that means for us.

Who is God? “The LORD is my shepherd.”

You can see in your translation that “the LORD” is in small-caps. This is how the translators signal that the word is actually God's personal name, Yahweh. In the Old Testament, names communicate something about a person's identity.

When God calls himself Yahweh, he is saying he is the God who makes and keeps promises. He is the God who is with and for his people. He is the God who is abounding in loyal love and faithfulness.

And David doesn't just say that the Lord is *a* shepherd, or *the* shepherd, but “*my* shepherd.”

He has a personal relationship with God. And the relationship is like a sheep with a shepherd. What does that mean? Most fundamentally—this means that God takes personal responsibility for caring for him. That's what shepherds do—they take responsibility for the well-being of their sheep.

Do you realize, if you are a Christian, if you are trusting Christ, God cares for you like this? He takes responsibility for you.

David knew what it was like to take responsibility to care for sheep. He grew up as a shepherd. He knew shepherds give sheep their presence, provision, and protection. Those three things—and that's what David will show us God gives us.

When David refers to God as a shepherd, he is also saying that God is his king and leader.

In the Ancient world, kings were called shepherds. This is because shepherds lead sheep just like a king is to lead his people. The king is to provide for the people's needs and protect them from harm. So the kings and leaders of Israel were called shepherds. David was a shepherd of sheep when he grew up, but then he was called a shepherd of Israel.ⁱ

What difference does it make to have God as your shepherd?

David gives the implication here in verse 1: "I shall not want." There is an implied "therefore" here. David is saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, *therefore* I shall not want." Because he knows God as his shepherd, he is content with what he has, and he is confident in the future.

The Hebrew word for "want" doesn't refer to desires, but needs. It refers to not lacking anything you need.ⁱⁱ

We certainly lack all sorts of things we wish we had. You may live with unmet longings. Maybe you want a relationship—a girlfriend or boyfriend, a husband or a wife. Or maybe you want your spouse to be better. Or maybe you want children. Or you want your cancer to go away. You want a better job, or a better-paying job, or a more fulfilling job.

This does not say we will have no more "wants;" it says we have no unmet needs.

And the first image here is that God restores us in the meadows.

David says he is a sheep laying down in green pastures, and being led beside still waters. When God is our shepherd, we are well-provided for and we are protected. If a sheep didn't have a shepherd, it could not lie down in safety, because a lion could eat it. But the shepherd is near, so the sheep can rest.

And the "still waters" is a calming image. The opposite would be dark, stormy, chaotic waters. But these could be translated, "waters of rest." The waters are still, and it leads to our soul being put at rest.

So the result is in verse 3, "He restores my soul."

This is a non-anxious calm. This is the effect of the green pastures and still waters. It's not just a physical restoration, but a psychological one, too.ⁱⁱⁱ

And we can summarize this with the word "content." When we trust God as our shepherd, "we shall not want." We know we are cared for.

The phrase, “the grass is always greener on the other side” refers to discontentment. God brings us in to a green pasture, but we think the one next to us looks better. But then the sheep in that pasture look at our grass and think *it’s* greener. We distort reality due to discontentment.

But this Psalm leads us to see how God cares for us. We can trust him. We can stop looking at other pastures, and look at our own.

2. He Leads Us on Right Paths (v3b)

The next image is a path. So, second, he leads us on right paths.

This is verse 3, “He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

“Paths of righteousness” could simply be translated “right paths.” In that sense, this may just refer to God leading us in the right way of life. Like a shepherd leading a sheep in a straight and safe way.

But this could also have the sense of a path of moral righteousness. God leads us in this way, too—he lays out in front of us, through his word, the wise, good, and right way to life. We learn from his word how to live with moral goodness.

God does this “for his name’s sake.”

Wouldn’t we expect this to say God leads us “for our sake”? But he does it for his own name’s sake, which refers to his own reputation. This is actually good news. It means God doesn’t lead us because of how good we are. He does it to show that he is our good shepherd. He leads us to demonstrate his care for us, and his character.

So, do you follow God’s righteous paths?

Is there a fork in the road for you right now?

Maybe you know the direction you should to go, but you feel drawn to go the other way. You know God’s word calls you to obey him in something, but you are trying to ignore that. Or you’re suppressing it in your heart.

Or you think you can disobey God’s word because you think he wants you to be happy.

Or you minimize it as a little, no-big-deal sin and you can do it and move on and it’s all fine.

But God has very clearly laid out his righteous paths in his word. And he gave us his Holy Spirit to convict, and motivate, and empower us to follow it. It is for our good. The shepherd knows better than the sheep. So take the step of obedience, and follow his righteous path.

3. He Protects Us Through the Valley (v4)

Third, he protects us through the valley. This is verse 4.

The image shifts from a meadow to paths, and now to a dark valley: “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.”

Before this verse, it looked like life was fine: Green pastures, still waters, and paths of righteousness. But we know life is not always like this. Sometimes God leads us through a valley.

We often experience valleys as safe and beautiful.

But David has in view a dangerous, dark valley. You didn’t want to walk through a valley after the sun went down. Enemies could come down and ambush you from the high ground.

The phrase here could be translated “the valley of deep darkness.” The image is of a sheep walking through a valley in the dead of night, with no moonlight. It’s thick darkness. If there ever was a place to be afraid; if there was a place you feel like you could die, it’s here.

Some writers describe the kind of dark valley that is in view. They point out that waters probably flowed through the valley, crashing on the rocks, and creating a chaotic, dangerous experience. One wrote, “the water often foams and roars, torn by jagged rocks... the path plunges downward... into a deep and narrow gorge of sheer precipices overhung by frowning... battlements of rocks.”^{iv}

I have a vivid memory of this kind of valley. Every summer a group of friends and I go on some kind of extreme wilderness adventure. Several years ago we kayaked down the Salmon River. We had done river trips before, but this was the first time we hit class IV rapids.

We just use individual kayaks, and without a guide. As we rented the kayaks, the worker had to leave to go find a missing person on the river—because that happens, and it’s part of the risk.

I remember the worst section felt like this verse. The sky was overcast already, and then we entered into a section of river that cut through a valley, with cliffs on the sides, so it was darker. Boulders and rocks were scattered throughout the river.

There were violent currents, large drops, standing waves. The worst was the recirculating hydraulics that can suck the kayak in and trap you. It could suck you in, keep you in the churning water, take you under, and then spit you out. Which it did.

The valley in view in Psalm 23 probably didn't have class IV or V rapids—but the rushing water was probably there, and dangerous for a sheep.

It's describing times of life when we could feel vulnerable and scared. Our path is dark and dangerous. We feel the shadow of death cast over us—pulling us in.

When have you felt this way? Maybe when heard the cancer diagnosis. Or when your daughter suddenly died. Or when you lost your mother or father. Or when your own sin caught up to you, and you had to face the fallout. Or when you began to sense your own mortality.

What do we do when we enter these valleys?

It's possible to say with David, "I will fear no evil." The word for "evil" can refer to calamity, or suffering, or harm. That's probably what David means here. We can go through the dark valley, and yet not fear any harm.

How can we do this? The natural response to life in the valley is anxiety and worry. Yet David says he will not fear anything. How do you get the diagnosis, and not feel anxious? How do you go through hardship, and not worry?

The answer is right here: "for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

The shepherd is right there with him. He is not alone. When you go through the valley, if Jesus is your savior, then he's also your companion. He is right there with you in the valley. You are never alone.

And he is not just with you there; he is protecting you—just as a good shepherd does. David says, "your rod and your staff, they comfort me." Shepherds were armed. They had a rod and staff as weapons. They used them to fight off any predators. And they use the crook to bring back a straying sheep. The rod and staff are a terror to predators, but a comfort to the sheep.

I was thinking of this verse a few days ago when I was on a backpacking trip in Colorado.

I was with a friend and our sons. We had just hiked several miles up a trail to a mountain lake, and we were on our way back down. Part of the path was a jeep trail, and we saw several jeeps slowly working their way up the rugged path. As the jeeps were coming through, a happy dog was romping around all over the place. He ran through the fields, splashed in the mud, romped through the forest. He came and said hello to us as he watched his owner's jeep slowly work up a rough spot. This was one of the happiest dogs I've ever seen. He was living the dream.

Then they went on their way up the trail, and we went on our way down the trail. But a while later, as we continued down the mountain, we hit a darker, thickly covered area of the trail. And we heard ahead of us, down the path, yelps and howls. It was the dog. He must have run through the woods, moved down the mountain, and reconnected to the path far away from his owners. He was scared and nervous.

The difference was striking. Ten minutes before, he was the happiest, freest dog I've seen. Now he was scared and anxious? What was the difference? Before, his owner was with him. Now, he was alone.

This is the difference the Lord's presence makes.

When we go through a dark valley, we can either think we're alone, and therefore worry. Or we can know the Lord is with us, and therefore be comforted.

Thankfully, the dog was smart. We pointed up the path and told him to keep going, and he seemed to understand, so he sprinted off up the path.

Whatever harm you fear, God is with you. And he will not allow anything to happen to you apart from his good purposes. He is with you, and he is for you.

4. He Honors Us with a Feast (v5)

The fourth image is in verse 5—he honors us with a feast. He says, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

The imagery seems to shift at this point away from a shepherd with a sheep. This is now the Lord hosting a feast with David as a guest.

I've always wondered about this verse—it seemed like a strange image to me: to have the enemies right there, and David sitting down to eat. But several commentators pointed out what this probably refers to: It's a feast after a battle with the defeated enemies in front of him.⁹ This is probably a victory feast. It is a public vindication. He was pursued by enemies, but God rescued him and throws him a victory party.

God does this for us as well. Isaiah 25 says history will wrap up with a feast. Listen to what Isaiah says: “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces.” The greatest enemy will be defeated, which is death itself. And then we will celebrate with a great feast.

This same image is used at the end of the Bible. In the final chapters of Revelation, we see that Jesus will return, he will destroy his enemies, and we will feast. Death will be defeated, and we will live on a new earth with Christ forever.

Notice the language David uses here:

God is the one who prepares the table; he is serving us as the host. And God anoints our head with oil—which is an act of hospitality and honor. And so our cup overflows—he fills the cup with wine, a symbol of joy, and it overflows with abundance.

This gives us a confidence even in the midst of our enemies. We know that God will vindicate us, and he will honor us—even if we feel outnumbered and dishonored right now. This future hope can give us an untouchable joy even in the midst of opposition.

There's an account of Jonathan Edwards that shows us how we can have this untouchable joy.

Jonathan Edwards was a pastor in New England in the mid 1700s. I've referred to him many times over the years. He served as a pastor, but his congregation fired him over some theological and practical disagreements. Ninety percent of the church voted him out. It was a dark moment of his life. Some of those who were leading the charge to fire him were right there.

One of the men who was there described how Edwards handled that moment.

He “received the shock, unshaken. I never saw the least symptoms of displeasure in his countenance the whole week but he appeared like a man of God, whose happiness was out of the reach of his enemies and whose treasure was not only a future but a present good, overbalancing all imaginable ills of life, even to the astonishment of many who could not be at rest without his dismissal.”^{vi}

He was going through a valley, and he had enemies before him. But he knew God was with him. He had a joy that was untouchable.

And so can you. God will host you as a guest at his table. He gives you a joy through the midst of your trials—and you will eventually feast with him when you're through it all.

5. He Welcomes Us into His Home (v6)

Finally, the last image: God welcomes us into his home.

This is verse 6, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

As God leads us through this life, he sets his own goodness and mercy on our tail. The word for “follow” could be translated “pursue.” God pursues us with his goodness and mercy.

Our life is hard, but goodness is coming behind. This is an Old Testament equivalent to Romans 8:28, “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good.” We go through suffering and hardship, but God’s goodness is coming right behind. Everything will work together for our good.

And his mercy is also pursuing us. Even when we litter our life with sin, his mercy comes to wash it away.

He doesn’t set *stinginess* and *calculating disappointment* behind us; he sets *goodness* and *mercy* on our path. He makes them follow us like loyal friends.

And where does this path lead?

To God’s presence, to our eternal home with him. David ends by confidently declaring, “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

There’s no question that the house of the Lord in the Old Testament was the temple. But, as we often see here in sermons—we always have to see how the temple is a whole-Bible theme. The temple was built as a symbol-laden Eden, recalling our original home with God. And it points forward ultimately to Jesus and the new earth to come.

Our path is leading to be with Christ on a new earth forever. This is our truest home. No matter where our path leads right now, no matter how dark and hard, it will end up there. We may have to go through valleys of darkness to get there—but the valley will never be our true home. God doesn’t lead us *to* the valley, but *through* it.

How can we have the confidence that this Psalm is true for us?

David knows the Lord is his shepherd. But how can you know for sure that the Lord is *your* shepherd? How can you know he really is this committed to us? How can we know that he will be with us in the valley of darkness? How do we know he wants us with him forever?

Because he proved it to us. Jesus came to us as our truest shepherd. He called himself “the good shepherd.” Peter called him “the chief shepherd.” The book of Hebrews called him “the great shepherd of the sheep.”^{vii}

Do you remember the story of Jesus feeding the thousands? Do you know what he said right before he did that? He said that they were “like sheep without a shepherd.” And then he didn’t just have them sit down—Mark says he had them *recline* on *green grass*. Jesus unfolded that miracle to show that he is the true shepherd who feeds his sheep. Jesus is the Shepherd of this Psalm.

And what is most surprising is that the shepherd served us best by becoming a sheep.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” He did this to protect us from judgment and to provide for our eternal life, and to be with us forever. He sacrificed so we could have his presence, his provision, and his protection.

And he did this by offering himself as not only a shepherd, but a sheep.

Do you realize that Jesus fulfills this Psalm both as the shepherd, but also as the sheep? When he came, he trusted the Father to shepherd him as he went to lay his own life down.

A few weeks ago Taylor made a great observation about this Psalm. He said that it really tells the story of Jesus. He enjoyed the green pastures and still waters as his Father cared for him. He walked along the paths of righteousness as no one else before him. Then he entered into the valley of the shadow of death. And yet as he died for us, he also rose, and God prepared a feast for him in the presence of his enemies. And so he ascended to heaven, to the presence of the Father, to the house of the Lord.

And because he did this for us, we can know he is our shepherd.

This is why Revelation 7:17 says Jesus is both the Lamb and the shepherd. Let’s end by listening to this verse: “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.”

If he is not yet your personal shepherd, he can be. He came to us to rescue us, protect us, and provide for us forever. Trust him as your shepherd, and as the lamb who laid down his life for you. We all deserve to walk through an eternal valley of death, but Jesus went through that for us so we could dwell with him forever.

ⁱ See 78:70–72.

ⁱⁱ For example, Psalm 34:10, “The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.” In Israel’s history: God cared for Israel in the wilderness so that they *lacked* nothing (Deut 2:7). He was bringing them into the land where they would *lack* nothing (8:9).

ⁱⁱⁱ God’s care for us leads us to a place of “psychological stability and soul-quiet” (James Hamilton, 1:295). We all know the effect of nature on our psychological state. When we go for a walk in the forest, a restful peace enters into our souls. There are a number of academic studies that confirm how nature changes us. It calms us and sets us at rest. And God’s care for us brings us a similar, but deeper renewal.

^{iv} Quoted in David Gibson, *The Lord of Psalm 23*, 63

^v See Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 129; Hamilton, 1:297

^{vi} Ian Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 327.

^{vii} He is the good shepherd (John 10:11, 14), the chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4), and the great shepherd (Heb. 13:20).