

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Psalm 23 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the psalm. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

PSALM 23:1-6 ESV

1 A Psalm of David. 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.

STRUCTURE

- I. Yahweh is our shepherd (1-4)
 - a. He provides for our every need – hunger, thirst, and restoration (1-3a)
 - b. He guides our every step – in both right and righteous paths, for the sake of His reputation (3b-4)
 - c. He protects our every step – even when He leads us through dangerous paths (5)
- II. Yahweh is our host (5)
 - a. He defeats our foes and makes with us a covenant of loving devotion (5a)
 - b. He welcomes us into His presence with great joy (5b)
 - c. He has given us a full life (5c)
- III. Yahweh is our covenant partner (6)
 - a. God's covenant love pursues us when we go out into the world (6a)
 - b. God's covenant love welcomes us when we leave this world (6b)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

The themes of God as shepherd (23:1-4), host in a banquet hall (23:4), and the desire to be with God in His temple (23:6) are all familiar to David. We are not told when this psalm was written, but one commentator suggests, based on similarities to Psalm 3, that David wrote this psalm while he was on the run from his son Absalom, after the rebellion. We can't know for sure.

Overall, the psalm reflects a pilgrimage that leads from fields and valleys (1-4) to the royal banqueting hall of Yahweh, where we celebrate His victory over our enemies (5). The final statement of the psalm emphasizes God's covenant love that binds His heart to our welfare in all of our comings and goings (6a), until He ultimately leads us to our eternal home (6b).

All of us are on this same pilgrimage. Knowing God as our Shepherd who richly protects, provides, and guides is necessary as we begin our pilgrimage. Ultimately, however, God will lead us home to His banqueting table, and to His home—the heavenly temple. The only shepherd who can lead us beyond death is the One who conquered it. While we long for that day, there's a sense in which it's already here. The church is called the temple of God—the place where God's presence most richly dwells. He's already conquered our enemies and set us at His table in the Lord's Supper. The same covenant love that makes the heavenly temple so wonderful is already ours. In this life, we taste it. In the next, we consume it fully.

Seeming to match the transition of scenery throughout the passage, there are also transitional prophetic statements. He moves from "I shall not want" (1) to "I will fear no evil" (4) to "I will dwell" (6). What does this mean for us? It means that God's character and covenant has a tangible effect upon our state of being. This is not just a

doctrine I believe. It is a reality I live in. Furthermore, as he goes from negative to positive, he communicates that a movement toward intimacy with God is a movement from “absence of harm” to “presence of good.”

Reflecting this intimate relationship is a transition in the pronoun used, the deeper we get into the song: He (1), He (2), He (2), He (3)→You (4), You (5), You (5). Thus, our pilgrimage brings us not merely home, but more closely in touch with the Head of our Household. At first we know God as a shepherd, and the relationship is certainly personal. But the longer we walk with Him, the more deeply we know Him, and the more capacities in which we know Him—not merely as “He” but as “You”; not merely as Shepherd, but as Host; not merely as God, but as Covenant Friend.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 A Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

—Not just “the LORD” as in “God,” but as in “Yahweh.” David has a personal relationship with a personal God. This is foundational. God is not just an impersonal being who makes sure we’re fed. His heart is with us, and therefore, our heart is full.

—“I shall not want”:

- I am fully provided for. The next verses elaborate on exactly what it means to not be in want. He provides for our every need (1-3a), He guides our every step (3b-4), and He protects our every step (5).
- To “not want” doesn’t mean that we never have any desires of any kind. It means to be in a state of contentment. Rather than being driven by our wants, we are led by our Good Shepherd. The wants we do have are met by Him readily.
- This doesn’t mean that He always gives us our wants immediately. We may have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Certainly we “want” to be out of that valley. But since this is a personal relationship we have with a personal God, our deepest want is to be with Him. We’d rather be in the valley with Him than the mountain without Him. If our deepest “want” is His friendship, we’ll be consistently content. Our secondary wants will maintain their proper place. Once they become primary, they become idolatry.

—Zech. 13:7 speaks of the Messiah as the Shepherd who will be struck, and the sheep scattered (quoted in Mt. 26:31).

—Spurgeon said that before a man can truly say, “the LORD is my shepherd,” he must first feel himself to be a sheep by nature, “for he cannot know that God is his Shepherd unless he feels in himself that he has the nature of a sheep.” He must relate to a sheep in its foolishness, its dependency, and in the warped nature of its will.

—Dictionary of Bible Imagery: “Sheep were not fenced in and left to fend for themselves. Instead they were totally dependent on shepherds for protection, grazing, watering, shelter and tending to injuries. In fact, sheep would not survive long without a shepherd.”

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.

—How do we avoid living in a state of want?

- Through a personal relationship with our shepherd, who meets our deepest wants and needs through His presence.
- By making us lie down in green pastures, He gives us the “food” we need, and by taking us to quiet waters, He gives us the “drink” we need. This means that He satisfies our deepest hunger and thirst – the things we need to be whole. The hunger and thirst He satisfies is first of all spiritual, but He no doubt provides for us physically also.
- God doesn’t lead us to mediocre pastures or somewhat dangerous rivers. He leads us to green pastures and still waters. There’s nothing in God that says, “I’ll just kind of take care of My people.” He cares for us abundantly.
- Philip Keller writes that sheep do not lie down easily, and will not unless four conditions are met. Because they are timid they will not lie down if they are afraid. Because they are social animals they will not lie down if there is friction among the sheep. If flies or parasites trouble them they will not lie down. Finally, if sheep are anxious about food or hungry they will not lie down. Rest comes because the shepherd has dealt with fear, friction, flies, and famine.

—“makes me”: Bruce Waltke translates the same word as “allows me.” It fits within the semantic range and makes more sense. Shepherds don’t crush their sheep into submission; they lead them to green pastures where they naturally lie down.

—“leads me beside quiet waters”:

- As opposed to a dangerous rushing river, the good shepherd leads his sheep to calm lagoons.
- The water is not merely for drinking, but also for resting, relaxing, cleansing.
- “quiet” waters = literally in the Hebrew “waters of restfulness”
- Calm waters for washing represent spiritual cleansing (Lev. 11:32; 16:4; 17:15; Num. 19:7; etc.)
- Thus, God satisfies our deepest wants by providing not only food and drink, but also by washing us from our sins and restoring our soul for a friendship with Him.

—“restores my soul”

- “soul” does not merely refer to his spiritual state. It’s a broad enough word to refer to the whole person. “my soul” often means “my life” or “myself.”
- To “restore” means to return something to its original state—that’s the way it’s understood throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.
- For God to restore our soul means that wherever we are hungry, thirsty, tired, or filthy... God satisfies each of these needs to restore us to a state of wholeness.

—“paths of righteousness”:

- This can also be translated as, “right paths.” Thus, it means both: (1) God leads me in the path of holiness, and (2) God leads me in the path of wisdom.
- The path of holiness and of wisdom at some points merge, because holiness is always wisdom. At other points, however, they run parallel without merging. What I mean is: whether or not I take a certain job, or live in a certain city, etc.... these are not always decisions of “holiness” per se, but they are decisions that require wisdom. God leads us to lead a holy life rather than a wicked one; He also leads us to make wise decisions instead of naïve ones.
- Following God means not just that we are moral human beings, but that we respond to His leadership for decision-making. Rom. 8:14: “as many as are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.”

—“for His name’s sake”

- This is the most encouraging part of Psalm 23 for me right now. It’s not just for my sake that God cares for me; it’s for His own sake. Yes, He loves me and cares for me for “my sake”; but behind that, God has stamped me with His name. To leave me to the wolves is to abandon His reputation. He can’t possibly do that.
- This reminds me of the many statements throughout the OT where God says, “It wasn’t for your sake, but for the sake of My own name that I did this,” or where Moses prays, “Save us because the nations will otherwise see that You abandoned us and curse Your name.”
- If we feel we have sinned too much or too terribly to be shepherded by God, we have forgotten not only that His grace is greater, but also that His glory is. For the sake of His glory, He shepherds us. Even if I was the most terrible sinner on the planet, God has bound His reputation to my welfare. That is good news.
- As a father, I want to guide my children. Why? Certainly, for their own sake, I want them to enjoy the best life has to offer. But also, for my sake, I want them to represent my name and family well. I want them to bring honor to me through their lives. I don’t want them to bring shame upon me. It’s like this with God. He has a vested interest in us traveling His right paths.
- Waltke: “Were he to lose one sheep along the path of life due to misadventure, his name would be tarnished in its honor and could not be trusted with all of his subjects’ hearts... We live in a universe wherein God’s interests and his people’s interest cohere, not compete.”

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.

—The valley of death is as much a part of God’s “right paths” as are green pastures.

—It doesn’t say that God leads us away from the valley of the shadow of death. There are times when a shepherd must necessarily guide us down a dangerous path. Our temptation is to think He’s abandoned us in that time. Why would a loving God lead us down such a dangerous path? We have no need to worry. His own reputation is at stake in the way He leads us and protects us along the way.

—The reason we “fear not” is not because danger is absent, but because God is present.

—“rod... staff”:

- The rod (a club) was for protecting the sheep; the staff (a shepherd's crook) was for guiding them. Why do both of these comfort? Because we know that God defeats our enemies and guides us well. If he only defeated our enemies, but left us wandering.... Or if He guided us, but it was into danger... this would not comfort us.
- The word "rod" comes from a verb meaning, "to smite, slay."
- In Lev. 27:32, the rod is for counting sheep.
- In Ezek. 20:37, the rod is for chastening the sheep as well as protection.

—The word for "shadow of death" seems to conjoin two words: shadow" and "death". It could be understood as "deathly darkness" or "darkness of death." It makes me think of the Egyptian plague of darkness—"a darkness that can be felt" (Ex. 10:21).

—Only God can lead us through death. Jesus as our Good Shepherd leads us beyond it.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

—This is a covenant meal. Much like the one in Exodus with the Old Covenant (Ex. 24:8-12), and with Jesus in the New Covenant. This verse helps us see the direction of God's shepherding. He's leading us "home" – to His table (5), and to His temple (6).

—Kidner: "In the Old Testament world, to eat and drink at someone's table created a bond of mutual loyalty, and could be the culminated token of a covenant...So to be God's guest is to be more than a acquaintance, invited for a day. It is to live with Him."

—I used to always think of this as a table being set on a battlefield with enemies raging, but unable to break through a forcefield of sorts. In reality, this is a victory meal. The enemies, defeated, are now forced to watch as we, the victors, celebrate.

—For believers in Jesus, our "table" is the Lord's Supper. Like the covenant meal portrayed here by David, this is our covenant meal, shared together in the presence of our enemies. The blood of Jesus becomes a visceral reminder to our spiritual enemy that he has been conquered by the blood of Jesus. Furthermore, as a covenant meal, it re-enacts and re-seals our covenant with Jesus—much like renewing one's wedding vows—thus becoming a loyalty oath to Jesus instead of demons (1 Cor. 10:14-22).

—Jesus criticizes the Pharisee for not anointing Him with oil as a dinner guest (Lk. 7:44-45). This would've been customary in Jewish culture. To anoint our head with oil refers not to our status as priests, kings, prophets, as some assert. In the context of a covenant meal, it is meant to communicate God's hospitality. It was the delight of a gracious host to give the guest scented, perfumed, oil to freshen up and even to heal cracked skin (especially after being in the sun and sand). This is similar to the way some cultures offer a hot towel following a meal.

—"oil" is a symbol of happiness in Ecclesiastes 9:8 and prosperity in Hosea 12:2. David is saying that God is the source of His joy because of His abundant hospitality.

—"my cup overflows":

- The metaphor we use for a "cup" today is a "lot in life." If I say, "this is my lot in life," I refer to my portion, my destiny, my life as it is received from God. Here, our lot in life is a not half-full or empty, but full to the brim and running over.
- David is saying that the LORD has filled his life with good things.

—"table" suggests bounty; "prepare" suggests loving foresight; "before me" suggests personal care.

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.

—Our entire life is a pilgrimage toward "the house of the LORD," where we will dwell forever. This explains why our shepherd sometimes leads us through dangerous valleys. Until we are home, there will always be danger. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, lovingly guides us to the house of the Lord.

—The pilgrimage from field, to valley, to table, to home, is now complete.

—"Goodness and mercy"

- We follow the good Shepherd; goodness and mercy follow us. When the Blessed One goes before us, blessings walk behind us.
- "mercy" is typically translated as God's steadfast love or mercy or lovingkindness, and it is understood to refer to His covenant love. From Ross: "the word does not refer to a spontaneous, unmotivated kindness, but to a kind of behavior that arises from a relationship which has rights and obligations (marriage, the household, the government). When the word is used with God, the

relationship is defined in terms of the covenant. Translations such as “loyal love” or “covenant faithful love” are wordy, but they are more precise than lovingkindness.

- The addition of “goodness” to mercy forms a hendiadys, where two words are used to communicate the same thing (i.e., “nice and warm”). In this case, the emphasis is on God’s loyal love, which consists of His unspeakable goodness.
- For God to abandon us, He would have to break His covenant; He would have to lie. If God lied, He would cease to be God. But He cannot lie. Thus, our eternal security rests not in our perfect character, but in His.

—“all the days of my life... forever”: the vision takes us beyond death to an eternal enjoyment of Yahweh’s friendship