



The Shepherd's Care

Psalm 23



My Shepherd

- Psalm 23 is attributed to David. The psalm begins “The LORD is my shepherd.”¹ The shepherd metaphor was widely used, and David himself was an actual shepherd.² Read Psalm 23.
- In this psalm, the shepherd metaphor is used in a very personal way. “The LORD is *my* shepherd.” David is a “sheep” under the care of the LORD (the shepherd). The sheep metaphor can be extended to all people, because every person is “like a sheep,” and every person needs a shepherd (*Isaiah 53:6, Matthew 9:36*).³
 1. In verses 1-3, what does the shepherd do for his sheep?⁴ How does this apply to God’s “sheep” today?
 2. How does the LORD “guide me in paths of righteousness” or “guide me along the right paths”?⁵

📖 “Show me your ways, O LORD,
teach me your paths;
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long” (*Psalm 25:4-5, NIV84*).



📖 “Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path” (*Psalm 119:105, NIV84*).

¹ ‘shepherd’ – a person who takes care of sheep; a familiar occupation in Israel.

² In the ancient Near East, the metaphor was often used for kings. In the Old Testament, God was called the ‘Shepherd of Israel’ (Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 40:10-11), and Israel’s kings were supposed to be ‘shepherds’ of God’s people (Ezekiel 34). David was an actual shepherd (1 Samuel 16:11, 17:15, 34-37; 2 Sam. 7:7-8; Psalm 78:70-71).

³ We are not like sheep in *every* way. We must consider the historical context of this image. In the west today, sheep are kept in large fenced-in areas; pasture (food) and water are plentiful enough and predators (i.e., animals that would kill and eat them) are relatively few; and dangers are minimized. In the setting of the Bible, sheep were out in the open needing to go from place to place (often long distances) to find pasture and water. It was easier to go astray and get lost. There were more dangers from predators and thieves. In this setting, sheep definitely needed a shepherd – someone who would watch over them, lead them, and protect them. We are like the sheep in the Bible setting. We tend to go astray from God and his ways; and we are subject to harm by the world, the evil one, and our own sin.

⁴ He provides for his sheep; so the sheep will not be ‘in want’ (i.e., lack what is needed). The LORD provides ‘green pastures’ (where the sheep eats) and ‘quiet waters’ (where the sheep drinks) – basic necessities of life. The words ‘lie down’ and ‘quiet’ indicate a sense of peace, security, and well-being. [God provides for his children. True peace and security are found in the Lord.] The LORD ‘restores my soul’ which may mean either bringing back the sheep that has gone astray, or refreshing the body through food, drink, rest and care. [God restores his children by his grace, and refreshes his children by his word and Spirit.] The LORD guides his sheep in paths of righteousness. ‘Paths of righteousness’ are the ‘right paths’ to get the sheep where he needs to go. [God guides his children in right paths, which are characterized by right attitudes and behaviors.]

⁵ The LORD guides, but we are not passive. We must be active in learning his paths. The LORD teaches and guides us through his word (the Bible) and by his Spirit (the Holy Spirit). We need to pray, seek, read, listen, and obey.

- ❑ On the way to green pastures, the right paths may go through deep canyons or dark valleys, which can be very difficult and dangerous. “The valley of the shadow of death” or “darkest valley” represents difficulty, darkness, danger, and even death (v. 4).⁶
- 3. However, even in “the valley of the shadow of death,” the psalmist says he will not fear (v. 4). Why does he feel this way?⁷ How does this apply to God’s “sheep” today?

📖 “The Lord is my light and my salvation –
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life –
of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1, NIV)



The Host

- ❑ In verses 5-6, the image changes. The shepherd is now a host, and the sheep is now a guest at his table. “To sit at [the LORD’s] table is to enjoy fellowship and communion with him. To do so ‘in the presence of my enemies’ is to have one’s special relationship with God declared publicly in a context of divine blessing and security.”⁸
- ❑ The faithful follower not only dines at the LORD’s table, but will “dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (v. 6; cp. Psalm 27:4). To dwell in the LORD’s house is to consciously live in his presence.⁹
- 4. How can we consciously live in the LORD’s presence all the days of our lives?¹⁰

The Good Shepherd

- ❑ In the New Testament, Jesus is revealed as the Shepherd. He says, “I am the good shepherd ... who lays down his life for the sheep... I lay down my life – only to take it up again” (John 10:11, 12). It is through faith in the risen Jesus that we experience the blessings of Psalm 23.

Reflection/Application

- Do you agree that you are like a sheep in need of a shepherd? If not, humbly consider that possibility! And remember that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who wants you to follow him.
- As a Christian, do you truly trust in the Shepherd’s care, even in dark valleys? Are you going astray in any way? This week, prayerfully read Psalms 23-27 and commit to follow the Lord.

⁶ ‘the shadow of death’ (*salmāwet*) – apparently a combination of two words: *sēl* (‘shadow’) and *māwet* (‘death’). Some translate it ‘deep darkness’ or ‘darkest valley’ (NIV). In any case, it is the strongest Hebrew word for darkness.

⁷ He will not fear because the LORD is with him. He is comforted by God’s presence. He is comforted by God’s ‘rod’ and ‘staff.’ ‘Rod’ (*shēbet*) may refer to a relatively short mace-like implement that could be used as a weapon to strike enemies or attacking beasts (though it could also mean ‘scepter,’ representing kingly authority). ‘Staff’ (*mish’enet*) likely refers to a longer, supporting staff, which could be used to guide the sheep. The rod and staff help comfort the ‘sheep’ because they provide reassurance of protection and guidance. This does not mean that the Christian believer will always be kept safe from physical harm, but his/her relationship with God and inheritance in heaven is secured by God’s power (see Romans 8:28-39; 1 Peter 1:3-5). Thus even in death, we are kept safe.

⁸ Gerald Wilson, *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms – Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 436.

⁹ The LORD’s dining table and house will be fully experienced after Christ returns (Luke 14:15, John 14:1-3), but those who have entered into a relationship with God (through faith in Christ) can experience God’s presence now.

¹⁰ To name a few things: through acknowledging God in the small, seemingly insignificant happenings of everyday life; constant conversation with God; small group Bible study; corporate worship; serving with others. What else?