

## A Study in Psalms, Week 2 The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm

*“I am the Good Shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.”*

Jesus, speaking in John 10:14-15

### Introduction

1. Life is **hectic**. People are **not at peace** with themselves, **not satisfied**
  - a. One in eight Americans age 18-54 suffers from an **anxiety disorder** (>19 million people).
  - b. This is a very real problem.
  - c. Books, doctors, pills, and counseling are all popular **remedies**. For example:

*“Your subconscious mind has an image of you... It is difficult to fight it because you are fighting yourself. The best solution, by far, is to upgrade your subconscious self image to be more the way you want to be.”*

*“This is my calling, passion and life's work. I WILL MAKE SURE you are happy if you put your trust in me.”*

James H. Schmelter, full-time hypnotherapist and provider of hypnotic and subliminal recordings

*“You can learn to defeat anxiety by replacing victim words with power language. Power language means using words that promote your feelings of self-worth and personal power.”*

Deanne Repich, Director, National Institute of Anxiety and Stress, Inc.

2. **God** has a **better** approach. <**Read Psalm 23**>
  - a. What **beauty** and **comfort** is found in this inspiring little psalm! Do you know it by heart?
  - b. It's been called “the most popular chapter in the Old Testament.”
  - c. It **comforts** the heart, **calms** the soul, and **encourages** those of God's flock.
    - i. And yet (only somewhat surprisingly) religion is under attack!
3. Let's **examine** this psalm, study its **imagery**, and look for **application** to our lives.

### Background

1. Written by **David** (see the superscription)
  - a. A shepherd in his **youth** (early preparation for leading Israel)

*“He also chose David His servant and took him from the sheepfolds; From the care of the ewes with suckling lambs He brought him to shepherd Jacob His people, and Israel His inheritance.”*  
Psalm 78:70-71
  - b. However, David probably wrote this psalm **late** in his life
    - i. Psalm expresses **deep understanding** of **danger**, **disappointment**, and **opposition**
    - ii. Not really the “stuff of youth”
2. This psalm paints **two images** of God:
  - a. As a **Shepherd**
  - b. As a hospitable **Host**

## The Sheep and the Shepherd

1. Knowing David was a shepherd, we may try to interpret this from the shepherd's viewpoint
  - a. Interesting book by Phillip Keller called *A Shepherd Looks at Psalms 23*
    - i. He grew up in East Africa
    - ii. Later, he lived as a sheep rancher for many years
  - b. But even Keller notes that clearly David is speaking as a **sheep**, not a shepherd
2. <Read Psalm 23:1>
3. Shepherd imagery very **common** in the Near East
4. Israelites were **known** as shepherds
5. Jesus referred to Himself as "*the Good Shepherd*" (John 10:14)
6. In using the word "shepherd," David creates a most **comprehensive** and **intimate metaphor** of God's **love** and **care** for His flock—not as "King" or "Deliverer" or "Rock" or "Shield," but as **guide, physician, protector** and **provider**.
7. **Good shepherds**, by definition, supply **everything** the sheep **need**
8. Contrast this with **Satan's** portrayal of us as **lacking** and **deprived** by God

*"Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" ... "You surely will **not** die!" (emphasis mine)*

Gen 3:1,4

- a. And he's **still at it** today! We're told we need more **self-confidence**, a better **self-image**, higher **self-esteem**!
- b. Our whole thinking is **self-centered** and **want-centered**.
9. David says that with God as his shepherd, he has everything he **needs**.
  - a. God is **all-knowing, all-caring, all-powerful**, and **all-loving**. He is **sufficient** for us.
  - b. But this **doesn't** mean we'll have everything we **want**.
    - i. God brought Israel to the "*good land*" where they would "*eat food without scarcity*," but He also "*let them be hungry*" in the desert to test and teach them (Deut 8:2-9).

*"The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; But they who seek the LORD shall not be in want of any good thing."*

Psalms 34:10

### 10. <Read Psalm 23:2-4>

11. In vv 2-3a, the emphasis is on **rest**. The shepherd provides **rest** for his **sheep**.
  - a. "*He makes me lie down in green pastures...*"
    - i. Sheep do not graze lying down—they only lie down and rest **after** they've eaten.
  - b. "*He leads me beside still waters...*" (lit. "waters of rest")
    - i. Sheep **won't drink** from quickly running streams or rivers.
    - ii. We can better appreciate this psalm by listening to what God said through Ezekiel:

*"For thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest,' declares the Lord GOD."*

Ezek 34:11-15

- c. *“He restores my soul”*
  - i. God provided David with **rest** and **restoration**
  - ii. There is a **dependency** here. In order to be **renewed** and **refreshed**, rest is a **prerequisite**.
  - iii. And there’s a **spiritual element** to this restoration too, one that goes **beyond** simple physical nourishment and rest. This is revealed in another of David’s psalms:
 

*“The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.”*

Psalm 19:7

- 12. God feeds us with his **Word** which gives us **spiritual** nourishment, rest and restoration.
- 13. Emphasis in verse 3b is on God’s **guidance**
  - a. A **principle task** of the shepherd is to **lead** the sheep to places of **nourishment** and **rest**
  - b. Consider **how** the sheep are brought to such places
    - i. Shepherd picks the **destination** in **advance**
    - ii. He guides the sheep there the **safest way possible**, via the “right path”
      - (1) Some paths are **dangerous** and should be **avoided**
      - (2) But even the **least** hazardous path can still be **dangerous!**
  - c. Verse 3b shows us **another reason** to trust in God’s guidance
    - i. *“For His namesake” = “He acts for the sake of His reputation”* (A. A. Anderson)
    - ii. The measure of the **shepherd** is the condition of his **flock**
    - iii. God’s reputation rests on His ability to **guide** and **care** for His people
      - (1) Moses reminded God of this in Exodus 32:11-12 (golden calf incident)
      - (2) Salvation through Christ brings praise *“to the glory of [God’s] grace”* (Eph 1:5-6)
- 14. Verse 4 talks about how safe we are with God as our Shepherd
  - a. **Doesn’t** say there won’t be **trials** and **tribulations** (*“evil”*)
    - i. Some paths will be **dark** and **dangerous** (*“the valley of the shadow of death”*)
  - b. Note the change in **pronouns**, from *“He”* to the **more personal** *“You”* and *“Your”*
    - i. God **leads** us during the **good times**, but He **accompanies** us during the **bad**
  - c. **God** is able to handle **any** situation (*“Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me”*)
    - i. Rod = a weapon to **defend** sheep against **predators**
    - ii. Staff = a tool to **guide** and **aid** the **sheep** (think of a shepherd’s crook)
    - iii. Shepherd would bring sheep to a walled, stone sheepfold (corral), and sleep in the **doorway**, ensuring they didn’t **wander away** and **protecting** them from predators.
 

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep... I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and go out and find pasture.”*

Jesus, speaking in John 10:7, 9
- d. Upshot: We will never “want” for **comfort** and **safety** in **God’s presence**

## The Hospitable Host

1. <Read Psalm 23:5-6>
2. Imagery **shifts** to that of David as a **guest** and God as a **protective host**
  - a. This is a **closer**, more **personal** relationship than that of a **sheep** to the **shepherd**
3. Near Eastern hospitality (then and now) involves a **deep obligation** to **security** and **comfort**:

*“According to the Bedouin law of hospitality, once a traveler is received into the shepherd’s tent, and especially once his host has spread food before him, he is guaranteed immunity from enemies who may be attempting to overtake him. In pastoral circles no human protection is greater than that afforded by the hospitality of a Bedouin chief.”*

A. A. Anderson, *Out of the Depths*

- a. Abraham entertained the “men” who passed by as **strangers** (Gen 18:1-8)
  - b. Lot even offered his **virgin daughters** to protect his guests! (Gen 19:6-8)
4. **Anointing** with **oil** = sign of **high honor** to an **esteemed guest**
5. The **overflowing cup** = the host **abundantly** sharing his **provisions** (nothing held back)
6. As a **result** of the provisions of verse 5, David declares in verse 6a that “*Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life.*”
  - a. Lovingkindness is a **covenant-word** (2 Sam 7:15) rendered “*love*” (NIV), “*mercy*” (KJV)
    - i. Also translated as “*steadfast love*” elsewhere (e.g. Psalm 136, RSV)
  - b. Suggests the **kindness** and **support** one counts on in **family** or between good **friends**

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
His mercies never come to an end.  
They are new every morning.  
Great is Thy faithfulness.  
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,  
Therefore I will hope in Him.*

Song based on Lamentations 3:22-24

- c. **Goodness** and **lovingkindness** are the **two most comforting attributes** of God’s character, especially in times of **trouble** or **distress**.
7. And we’re promised this “guest protection” in God’s house **forever and ever!** (vs. 6b)
  - a. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is the O.T. equivalent of Romans 8:31-39 (“*What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?*”...)

Next week, Psalm 73...