

David, king of Israel, famously meditated on the LORD his King who provides for our every need, during times of peace and safety, and when facing fears and threats—all as the ever-present, loving shepherd of his sheep. Can you also sing with repose: “thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me”?

Introduction – Most people understand needs are more important than wants. But it’s in the details where confusion can lead us astray.

Background – Some interpreters see two “relationship” images in this psalm: shepherd/sheep (vv. 1-4), and host/guest (vv. 5-6). Both these images are there, but it’s best to see the whole psalm as a meditation on the shepherd/sheep relationship, imagined as a typical day in the life of a sheep.

I. The Shepherd’s Provision

A. “I shall not want” (vv. 1-3a)

Green pastures, still waters, restored soul. Usually David employs more distant metaphors for the LORD: king, deliverer, rock, shield. But a shepherd lives with his flock and is everything to his sheep: their guide, physician, protector, provider. With the shepherd’s provision the sheep experience a return of life and vitality, hence “he restores my soul” (Psalms 19:7; 60:1; Ruth 4:15; Proverbs 25:13; Lamentations 1:19; Isaiah 49:5). But to say “the LORD is my shepherd” is to confess a whole lot more than just God is my friendly provider. In the ancient world, the image of shepherd evoked the king. Yahweh is portrayed as the shepherd of Israel, caring for his sheep in the wilderness, in the promised land, and even in their exile (Deuteronomy 2:7; 8:9; Psalms 74:1; 77:20; 78:52-53; 80:1).

B. “I will fear no evil...in the presence of my enemies” (vv. 4b, 5)

Security, protection, free from all fears. “Evil” translates the Hebrew word *ra’ah*, which can refer to harm or trouble. I think what we have here is post-battle language of enemy captives present at the victory celebration. The culmination of such a feast could be a covenant relationship, as it was for the elders of Israel on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:8-12). Look how the LORD cares for his people: with anointing. In the Bible, anointing is a symbolic gesture, indicating the blessings of abundance, joy, cleansing, health, beauty, healing, revival, and strength (Ecclesiastes 9:8; Psalm 92:11). I wonder if David wrote Psalm 23 in hiding when he fled his son Absalom’s insurrection (2 Samuel 15). As the exiled king pondered that terribly distressing episode in his life, nevertheless he couldn’t stop singing, focusing on the LORD’s simple blessings that overflowed to him, providing even more than he needed (Jeremiah 33:3).

II. The Shepherd’s Guidance

A. “He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (v. 3b)

Paths of righteousness are the correct paths for flourishing in life (Proverbs 12:28) and enjoying Yahweh’s protection (Psalms 1:6; 5:8). The “path” image is of trails clearly marked by the tracks of wagon wheels. It’s a metaphor for the life of humble, faithful, Christ-like obedience to God’s word. Why does the LORD care so much for David, for you, for us? “For his own name’s sake.” The LORD leads his sheep in paths of righteousness first and foremost so that he might be remembered and celebrated and praised in song as the Good Shepherd. By saving his people, Yahweh reveals his covenant love by guiding them in all righteousness (Psalms 109:21; 30:3-5). Consider the implications for God leading us for his name’s sake. It should be our rock-solid security and confidence, because his leadership does not correspond to anything in us by nature, nor is it rooted in what we think, say, or do. Rather his guiding us in paths of righteousness springs from his own heart.

B. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (v. 4a)

What a contrast to the green pastures of verse 2! The psalmist recognizes that life will not always be green pastures and still waters. His worldview is mature and realistic, knowing that following the shepherd means sheep will walk through deep darkness, evil, and gloom (Psalm 107:10). The type of valley in view here is the desert streambed with steep and narrow slopes, which is carved by the rushing waters of spring. Such shadow valleys are a sinister presence, associated with such dangers as falling, flash floods, wild animals, and outlaws lying in wait for ambush (Job 28:3; Jeremiah 2:6). To find those paths of righteousness (the safe, well-worn paths), sheep must at times follow the shepherd through these dark, foreboding valleys. It’s a picture of walking in dark times, through the many uncertainties of life, yet without fear because our shepherd is near.

III. The Shepherd’s Presence

A. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (v. 6a)

“Love” (NIV) or “mercy” (ESV) refer to God’s covenant devotion and loyalty, his *chesed*, or covenant blessings instead of curses (Exodus 34:6; Deuteronomy 28:3, 15, 45). *Chesed* is a hard word to translate into English because of its depths of meaning. Let’s just say it all boils down to God and everything wonderful about him—all with you, all for you, and in every possible way. That’s what it’s like for Yahweh to follow you. Except “follow” also has the meaning “pursue,” which in other biblical contexts indicate an enemy giving chase, but here goodness and *chesed* (God’s covenant love) pursue the sheep for the rest of their lives (Psalms 7:5; 71:11). There is always a greater pursuit afoot—the goodness and steadfast covenant love of Yahweh!

B. “For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (v. 4c-d)

The thematic center of the psalm. Notice how the psalmist switches from the third to the second person, effectively speaking *about* his LORD and then speaking intimately *to* his LORD. The image is now side-by-side companionship with the shepherd. Sheep are comforted by their shepherd’s rod and staff. Rods were used to ward off threatening wild animals. The staff was for directing, supporting, guiding, and controlling the flock. But don’t forget we’re reading poetry here. Together the rod and staff express completeness. Here’s the sense: the LORD will certainly protect his sheep from all conceivable dangers. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

C. “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (v. 6b)

The climax of the psalm. Like a sheep with its shepherd, the psalmist quiets himself with the assuring thought that he will live in his LORD’s house forever (John 14:23). An eternal home with the LORD is the overarching hope. While the Hebrew doesn’t say “forever” but rather something like “for the rest of days,” the logic of the covenant is of an eternal relationship. God’s commitment to his people has no end of days (Matthew 22:32). Neither death nor life will separate us from God’s loving presence (Romans 8:38-39). If you are Yahweh’s sheep, then every day of your life you will return home, to dwell in the LORD’s presence. This is the promise of promises in the gospel. That you would hear the Good Shepherd’s voice, follow in his presence, realize he was pursuing you all along, and then you return home to be united to him, Shepherd-to-sheep, every day, forever. Amen!

Conclusion –How can you stop being afraid of all the potential dangers in the uncertain places in life? Faith in God’s presence, hope in God’s presence, and love for God’s presence. Faith, hope, and love—together these are the key to conquering your fears. They’re all right in the middle of Psalm 23, bidding you to make these words your prayer, your profession, your psalm. “Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” In the care of the Good Shepherd, I won’t promise you’ll have all your wishes granted, but I know you can say with confidence, “I shall not want.” And the longer you stare and think about Psalm 23, at the end of the day, isn’t he all you need?