

The LORD is my Shepherd

Psalm 23

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Congregation, a man called Henry Beecher wrote of the 23rd Psalm this. He said, "It has filled the air of the whole world with melodious joy. It has charmed more griefs to rest than all the philosophy of the world. It has remanded to their dungeon more black doubts, more thieving sorrows than there are sands on the sea shore. It has comforted the noble host of the poor. It has sung courage to the army of the disappointed. It has poured balm and consolation into the heart of the sick, of captives in dungeons, of widows in their pinching griefs, of orphans in their loneliness. Dying soldiers have died easier as it was read to them; ghastly hospitals have been illuminated. It has visited the prisoner, and broken his chains. And like Peter's angel, has led him forth in imagination and sung him back to his home again. It has made the dying Christian slave freer than his master, and consoled those whom dying, he left behind mourning. Nor is its work done. It will go on singing to your children and my children and to their children through all the generations of time, nor will it fold its wings until the last pilgrim is safe and time has ended, and then it shall fly back to the bosom of God from where it came, and sound on mingled with all those sounds of celestial joy which make heaven musical forever."

It is little wonder that Psalm 23 is so well-known and so well-loved. It's very well-known, I trust, here, the children here, you can sing this Psalm. You know this Psalm very well. It's certainly a Psalm that used to be very well-known and often sung both at weddings and at funerals. People who otherwise don't go to church would be able to sing it and often sing it with great enthusiasm. So when you think of this Psalm, you might associate it with youth. This is the Psalm that children know. You might also associate it with old age and with the song at the funeral even. But you notice that the Psalm itself goes past that even, past the song of a funeral. Yes, the Psalm has a valley of the shadow of death but the Psalm ends in God's house forevermore. But of course, the important thing is not when we sing the Psalm but rather how we sing the Psalm, and the question for us this morning is: can we sing this Psalm the way that David sings it?

Now children, again, you know that David was a shepherd boy. He was the youngest son of Jesus and he was out in the fields when Samuel came because he was the shepherd. He was looking after his father's sheep. And David, the Lord says, we're told in the Bible at the end of Psalm 78 that God took David from following after his father's sheep, from the sheepfolds, he took him so that he would be the king of Israel, so that he would feed, and

the word is shepherd, so that he would shepherd his people Israel. So even David's training, if you will, in the fields of Jesse his father as a shepherd, was preparing him to do the work of a king and it was always understood certainly in the past and it should be understood by us now, that the work of a king is really the work of a shepherd. The two are very much the same thing. The work of a king is the work of a shepherd and so David is the shepherd king.

Then, of course, then David knows about sheep far more than likely most of us know, but we're not asking do you know everything David knew about sheep and about shepherding, although it's good to learn about that. We're asking can we sing this Psalm by faith? Can we sing this Psalm in that way, the same way as David sings it? Because you notice that this Psalm is not really a prayer like so many other Psalms. This Psalm is a confession. This Psalm, if you will, is a creed. This is David's confession of faith. He's saying, "Here is what I believe about my life. Here is what I believe about my death. Here is my only comfort in life and in death."

And he begins this confession of faith in verse 1, the verse we want to look at today,

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

And in many ways, that says it all. In many ways, that is the confession of faith that the rest of the Psalm will simply unpack. What does it mean not to want, not to lack when you have this shepherd as your shepherd? What does that look like? The rest of the Psalm will explain and, Lord willing, we'll look at in later weeks. But for now David is saying, "This is my confession. This is what I trust in. This is my hope. This is my expectation. This is my desire. This is my creed. Here is what I will live by. Here is what I will bring me into death's dark veil. Here is my hope for an endless world."

David's confession of faith and really in a nutshell he's saying, "My relationship to the Lord means that he will give me everything I truly need for life, for death, and for eternity." What a wonderful confession to have. "My relationship to the Lord means that he will give me everything I truly need for life, for death, and for eternity." And simply this morning, we want to look at the foundation of his confession and the fullness this confession ensures. The foundation of his confession, "The LORD is my shepherd," and the fullness this confession ensures, "I shall not want."

So firstly here, the foundation of David's confession. Now when somebody gives you their creed, when somebody gives you their confession, a short statement of what they believe to be undeniably true, when somebody gives you that, if it has any worth to it at all, it carries with it the claim that this is something you ought to believe too. This should be your creed as well. "This is my creed. This is what I believe is undeniably true and so should you." But when somebody tells you that, the first question you should really ask is, "Well, why? Why should I believe this too? Why should this be my creed? On what basis do you say that? What makes you so certain that this is what ought to be believed?" And you notice here in verse 1 that David together with every believer in Christ Jesus, begins by giving us the foundation of his confession in these simple words, "The LORD

is my shepherd." That's the basis. That's the foundation. That's the reason for everything else. And what's striking straightaway is that the foundation of his confession is not a theory. It's not a speculation. But rather the confession is a person and that, my dear friends, is hugely important. It's not a job. It's not a bank account. It's not an insurance policy. It's not state benefits. It's not a healthcare system. It's not a reputation. It's not a feeling. It's not an experience. It's a person.

There is a person who is there at the foundation of this confession and who is this person? "The LORD," he says, and you notice it's in capital letters which tells us that this is the covenant name of God. This is Jehovah. This is the God who appeared to Moses at the burning bush and said, "I AM THAT I AM. That is my name. That's who you tell the people that has sent you. I AM THAT I AM." And all that's bound up in that name. This is the eternal one. This is the one who's from everlasting to everlasting. This is the God of creation. This is the God of providence. This is the God of redemption. This is the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob. This is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the faithful one. This is the one who always acts perfectly in accordance with his own name. He is today what he has always been, and he will always be what he is today. He is the all-powerful one. He can do whatever he wants to do, whatever he promises to do. He is able to do it.

He is self-sufficient. Now that means he is the God who needs nothing. You cannot give to him. You cannot add to him. You can't give him knowledge. You can't tell him what he doesn't know. You can't give him wisdom. You can't tell him how to apply the knowledge he does have. You can't add power to him. You can't make him stronger. He is the all-sufficient one.

He's the one who when Moses said, "Lord, show me your glory," he passes by and he shows him his name and the name is this, "The Lord, the Lord God merciful and gracious, longsuffering, abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin and will by no means clear the guilty. This is who I am." This is his name and when we begin to see this name like Moses, we need to take the shoes from off our feet because it's holy ground because this is a great God, this is a holy God, this is an awesome God, this is the Lord.

But what's so remarkable about David's confession is the title that he gives to the Lord. Do you see? He calls him the shepherd. That's speaking about his work, it's speaking about his office. And don't you think there's a danger when we come to a Psalm like this, Psalm 23, that's so familiar to us, we know it, we can almost, as we would say, sing it in our sleep, and we think, "Well, what can we learn about this Psalm that we've known all our days?" But with our familiarity comes the danger that we can read it and sing it without grasping the absolute wonder of what David is saying here. To put the word or the name "LORD, Jehovah" beside the name "shepherd," how can these two things go together?

A shepherd, at least in Israel, was very lowly work. That's why it was David, the youngest son of Jesse who was up in the field. Not the older brothers. You give it to the

youngest brother. It's the lowly work. It's the work nobody else wants to do. And if you know anything about sheep, who would want to care for sheep 24/7? Sheep wander. Sheep stray. Sheep are vulnerable to danger. You've got to watch them constantly. Sheep bleat. Sheep don't give you anything back. Sheep are known as stupid animals. They need constant care, constant attention, constant protection. Who would want to be a shepherd?

Do you see how remarkable these words are, "The LORD," who is God over all, blessed forever, the sovereign one, the eternal one, the ruler of the universe, the one that angels worship unceasingly, "The LORD is my shepherd." He is the one watching day and night. He is the one restoring. He is the one feeding. And of course, this Psalm, children, doesn't it, this Psalm ought to point us to the great shepherd. Who does this Psalm make you think about? You say, "Well, David." Yes, but who else? Who is the Psalm about? Who is David really talking about? You say, "The Lord." Yes, but who is that Lord that David is speaking about because if all we see in this Psalm is a nice picture about sheep and shepherds, we've missed the point. David is also a prophet, the Bible says, and David sees the one who said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep." The Lord Jesus Christ says, "I am the good shepherd." That's the one David sees. That's the one who is at the heart and is the rock and the foundation of his confession and his confidence for life and for death.

David's son is also David's Lord and the word for "Lord," the word in the Greek version of the Old Testament is the same word that's used of Christ in the New for "Lord." The Lord of Psalm 23 is David's Lord who is also David's son. The Lord of Psalm 23 is the Lord Jesus Christ. It's no surprise, it would have been no surprise to David to have heard Jesus say in John 10, "I am the good shepherd. I am. I, Jehovah, Jesus, I am the good shepherd." David's confession is, "The Lord Jesus Christ is my shepherd. This is the one I am taken up with. This is the one I am looking to. This is the one I am trusting in. This is the one, the rock and the foundation of my confession. The one who is God in whom was life, who made the worlds, who's the brightness of the Father's glory, he is my shepherd."

It's a very tender name as well, isn't it? There's lots of names of God, as you know. God is the judge. God is the Creator. God is all-powerful. God is the sovereign. But what an approachable name this is, shepherd. When you think of shepherd, you can think of Isaiah 40:11 that describes what God does as a shepherd. "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young." It's so approachable, isn't it? There's gentleness, there's tenderness, there's care in shepherd, in the good shepherd.

So Jesus is the good shepherd and the New Testament three times refers to Jesus directly, at least, as a shepherd, and each of these three times with three different names that it gives or adjectives about the shepherd, each tell us something of what Christ is like as the shepherd king. It tells us he is the good shepherd. It tells us he is the great shepherd. It tells us he is the chief shepherd. In John 10:11, he is the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. In Hebrews 13:20, he is the great shepherd who the God of peace has brought again from the dead. He has risen, this great shepherd. And in 1 Peter 5:4, he is the chief shepherd who is returning for his sheep. When the chief shepherd shall appear,

you shall receive a crown of glory that fades not away. And so what David is saying is, "He is the good, he is the great, he is the chief shepherd. He has done everything for me. I was a lost sheep. I was going astray but he died for me. He rose for me. He protects, he leads, he cares, he provides and he's coming again for me. He's preparing a place for me in glory at last."

And even then when you come to Psalm 23 and you look at the Psalms that are around it, and we should look at the Psalms around it because in many ways they are certainly messianic and they're also royal. They're the songs of the king and the king, you remember, is the shepherd. And so in Psalm 22, you don't have, well, one other man said that Psalm 22 is the Psalm of the cross, Psalm 23 is the Psalm of the crook or the shepherd's staff, and Psalm 24 is the Psalm of the crown. The cross, the crook, and the crown. And Psalm 22 is first. It's the Psalm of the cross. There's no green pastures here. There's no comforting staff in Psalm 22. There's no still waters there. No, this is the death of the good shepherd. This is the smiting of the shepherd of Israel. Psalm 23 speaks, though, of his life. Indeed, Psalm 22 ends with the resurrection of Christ, that he has been heard, and Psalm 23 speaks now about what he will do as the risen shepherd. And then Psalm 24 speaks about the crown, the everlasting gates been lifted up and the king of glory, the shepherd of Israel, going up and going up so that he will prepare a place, a house for his people forever.

But let us be clear here that there would be no Psalm 23 without Psalm 22. There would be no quiet waters were it not for the waters of death that went over his soul. There would be no life forevermore were it not for the death of the shepherd. You could never say, "The LORD is my shepherd," if the shepherd did not first say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And you can never have the wonderful blessings of Psalm 23 without coming to them through the crucified Savior. But turn that around and put it positively. You can have all the blessings of Psalm 23, what glorious blessings there are, you can have them all through this crucified Savior who is calling you, "Follow me. I am the good shepherd. I am the door. By me if any man enter in, he will be saved." Come to Christ, then. Come to Christ crucified and you will find a tender shepherd, you will find a shepherd who never turns anyone away. Call out to him if you're stuck on the mountains of sin and temptation. Call out to him, "I am like a lost sheep. O seek and find me, O great shepherd of Israel."

So this foundation, what a foundation it is but I do want to emphasize one more word here and it's that little word "my," because he doesn't just say the Lord is the shepherd, he doesn't say as Psalm 80 begins, "O shepherd of Israel," but he says, "The LORD is my shepherd." He's speaking, then, about a relationship and, again, this is so remarkable if we could but see it. When you look at the Lord, you look at the Lord as the shepherd, that is a glorious thing but, oh, to be able to say, "The LORD is my shepherd. He belongs to me." You think of the sheep belonging to the shepherd, "My sheep," Jesus says. But the sheep of Christ are saying, "My shepherd. My shepherd. My pastor." It's the same word. So if somebody asks you, "Who is your pastor?" And you give the name of your pastor but really the people of Christ can all say, "Jesus is my pastor." What a wonderful thought, Christ is my pastor, Christ is my shepherd.

What encouragement here for any person who are here, even to hear about the Lord as the shepherd. That's encouraging, that the Lord who we know is the judge and the ruler and the one who hates sin, he is also the shepherd. That gives hope that the Son of God took the same nature, that he became man, that he suffered, that he died for the sheep, that he rose again, that he's alive for the sheep, that he promises he won't turn anyone away. "I am the door. By me if any man enter in, he shall be saved." What hope is there, what gospel, what good news.

And the poor trembling sinner is saying, "I am like a lost sheep. This is hopeless. Sin is too strong. Satan is too strong. The wolf is too subtle. He's too strong. I've gone astray." No, no, there's hope here because there's a good shepherd here. And maybe this is what's in your heart this morning, "Oh, I desire to be in this fold. Here is the shepherd I need. Here is the one who takes sin away. Here is the one who will care and provide and protect me from all his and my enemies. Here is the one who can protect me from the wolf that comes to destroy and to kill. Here is the one who can give eternal life."

But that little word "my" is the language of faith. It's the language of a person who has come and who has cast themselves soul and body for life and for death and for eternity upon the mercy and the care of the good shepherd. You've given up everything to him. When you are saying, "The LORD is my shepherd," you are saying, "I am no longer leading my own life. I'm no longer going my own way. I'm no longer making my own decisions. No, it's the Lord who is shepherding me," is actually literally what it says. "He goes on shepherding me all the days of my life. I've given everything into his hands." Augustine, the church father, said, "When you say the Lord is my shepherd, no proper grounds are left for you to trust in yourself." When you say the Lord is my shepherd, no proper grounds are left for you to trust in yourself. I am not my own, Lord's Day 1.

So this is the foundation of the confession, but now let's look here for a bit at the fullness this confession ensures. The fullness this confession ensures. Well, there's a divine and a heavenly logic about this confession. "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." I shall not want. I shall not lack. It's an incredible confession but it's an unavoidable conclusion. He's saying this is the only way it can possibly be now. Because the Lord is all that he is, because he possesses all things, because he has loved me and given himself for me, because he has promised he will not withhold any good thing from those who love him, here is the unavoidable logic of this confession, "I shall not want."

And you see these kinds of statements three times in this Psalm, and each time David is saying, "This is true of me because this is true of the shepherd." You see it in verse 1, "I shall not want." Verse 4, another of these great statements, "I will fear no evil." In verse 6, "I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever." What incredible statements to make in this world where there's so much lack, where there's so much fear, where there's so much uncertainty. "I will not want. I will not fear any evil. I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever." But why, David? "Because the LORD is my shepherd. Because he is with me wherever I am, and because goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life."

And so he says, "I shall not want." Then he puts it negatively. Sometimes when you do that, it emphasizes the positive more. "I will not lack." And you notice he doesn't tell you what he doesn't lack here, he'll unpack that more as the Psalm progresses. Here he just says, "I will not lack. I will not lack anything good," he says. And again, how astonishing in this world today where lacking or wanting is exactly what marketing and advertisements all are designed to make you feel. That's what they're telling you, "You're missing something. We've got it. You need this. You lack this. We've got it. If only you had this, the lack that's in your life, don't you see? Your health, your wealth, and all the other things, you would have it." They're playing on the sense, the deep sense of lack, the sense of wanting, the sense that we don't have what we need. That's the whole, that's the way this whole world is structured today.

And here is this confession right from the beginning that says, "I shall not want." And when you think of the fact that the people saying this are described as sheep, how astonishing it really is, because that is exactly the condition of sheep. Sheep are the most helpless animals but the sheep of this shepherd say, "I will not lack. I won't lack spiritual life. I won't lack what I truly need in my soul. I won't lack when I come to death, even the great lack, the great loss," we would say, "of life itself. No. No, death is yours," the good shepherd says, "life is yours, death is yours, all things are yours in Jesus Christ. You will not lack even in death's dark veil."

Now, of course, that doesn't mean that a Christian will never be without what they would like. It doesn't mean they will never be without what they pray for. You pray for something you believe is good. You pray for something, you say, "Lord, I need this." Remember Paul, he's praying with a thorn in the flesh to be taken away, a lack. If it says, "I," which I think it is, if it is, "I lack the sight. I lack the ability to minister because of this thorn in the flesh. I'm lacking." And the Lord is saying, "I have given. My grace is sufficient for you." So for God's people to come realize is that even when we lack something, that itself is a gift from the love of the good shepherd. That's part of the "all things that work together for good."

"I will not withhold anything," he is saying, the shepherd is saying, "I will not withhold anything that is ultimately for your spiritual good." A lion's young may do that. They may be hungry but you will not lack your food when you seek the Lord. So you could find yourself in the worst possible situation as the world would see it, or even as you might see it, "This is the worst possible situation for me to be in," but with the Lord as your shepherd it will be infinitely true right then you will not lack. You can be without health but you will not lack saving health. You may feel lonely but you will not be alone. You will not lack the presence of him who said, "I will never leave you."

The shepherd may lead you, as one man said, down roads less traveled by, roads less traveled by. Well, maybe someone here this morning is feeling, "I'm walking down a place, I'm going down a road that I don't think anybody else understands. Nobody else has this." It's a road less traveled by. You feel very alone in it perhaps and what does the shepherd say? "Even if it is the valley of the shadow of death, even if you are walking

down a road less traveled by, I'm with you. I'm not leaving you." And so you say, "I will not fear any evil because thou art with me."

And you turn that around, then, and you can say the opposite. You can say you can have everything in terms of what the world can give you, people can look at you and say, "Well, he has it made. She has it made. She's got everything. He's got everything. They've got it made." And you can have everything that the world can give you in terms of money and pleasure and reputation and ease and comfort and everything else, but my dear friend, you lack everything you truly need, everything you truly need if you don't have the good shepherd. "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?"

Douglas MacMillan, who some of you remember preaching here in the late '70s, writing on this Psalm puts it well. He says, "If this Lord is your shepherd, you have not yet begun to know how blessed you are, how God has blessed you. And if this Lord is not your shepherd, you have not yet begun to know how poor and how miserable and how blind and how naked you really are before your God and your Creator."

This is David's confession and he's saying, "You ought to have it too. My relationship to the Lord means that he will give me everything I truly need for life, death and eternity." And the question we leave with you this morning is that: is this your confession? Is the foundation of your confession and your hope for life, death and eternity, the shepherd of Israel, the Lord Jesus? It's not enough to know the Psalm, you need to know, as people have often said, you need to know the shepherd of the Psalm. And he's saying, "Follow me."

I was reading that there was once a Shakespearean actor who was known everywhere for his great recitals of classic works, and it's said he would always end with Psalm 23. It was a very dramatic reading of Psalm 23 and he'd done this for many many years. And every night as the actor began his recitation, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want," the crowd, people said, would listen spellbound, and when he was finished, they would rise to their feet and give him a standing ovation and they would, as it were, be wowed by it. But one night before he gave this Psalm 23 recital, this young man from the crowd came forward and said, "Would you mind if this evening I read Psalm 23?" And he was taken aback. Who could read it as well as him, he who had been doing it for so many years? And this young man went forward and read it with a quiet and a soft voice, and afterwards there was no applause and there was no standing ovation, but there was the sound of weeping. Indeed, people said you could hardly see a dry eye. And the man said, "I don't understand this. I've been doing this for years. I've been performing Psalm 23 for years now and after a lifetime of experience and training, I've never been able to move an audience like this. Tell me what is your secret?" And the young man said, "Well, sir, you know the Psalm but I know the shepherd of the Psalm."

And the question, my dear friends, for us is not do we know the Psalm but do we know its shepherd? It is poetically incredibly beautiful but we need more than to recite it and appreciate its beauty, this Psalm is written by a sheep who knew and loved the shepherd who suffered and died for him. It's a Psalm that has been believed and trusted and by

many down through the ages. It's a Psalm that is a confession of faith, a confession that says, "I need this. I need him and I believe in him with all my heart, and you ought to, too. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." Amen.

Let us pray.