

# Refuge

*I will say to the LORD,  
“My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”  
(Psalm 91:2 ESV)*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When shall I come and appear before God?  
(Psalm 42:2 ESV)*

*And those who know your name put their trust in you,  
for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.  
(Psalm 9:10 ESV)*

## **The Lord Is My Shepherd**

**May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020**

**Psalm 23**

**Rev. Levi denBok**

### **Introduction:**

Good morning! I want to give a special thanks to our worship team who read our passage for us this morning and to Jackson Giffen who put that video together. Let's turn to that text now and look together at Psalm 23.

There is a sense in which this familiar Psalm is very simple. The imagery is clear and accessible. There is nothing particularly challenging about the grammar. It is the most memorized Psalm for a reason! And yet, while these verses are simple, they are certainly not shallow. Commentator Derek Kidner writes:

Depth and strength underlie the simplicity of this psalm. Its peace is not escape; its contentment is not complacency: there is readiness to face deep darkness and imminent attack, and the climax reveals a love which owes towards no material goal but to the Lord himself.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 15; IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 127.

The reason why Psalm 23 is so universally beloved is because it offers more than mere sentimentality. With its beautiful imagery and poetry, it portrays a truth that will stabilize us through any storm.

David here teaches us that the God who is OVER US is also the God who is WITH US. The God of the universe is personally present with His people! Therefore, this Psalm sets our gaze and whets our appetite for the arrival of God with us, Emmanuel. William Plumer notes:

That the Psalm has a special reference to the Lord Jesus Christ seems to be very clear.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus certainly understood himself to be the fulfilment of this Psalm. With no disclaimers and no ambiguity, Jesus said:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11 ESV)

<sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:14-15 ESV)

This is a song about how God leads and comforts His people with His presence. And nowhere has God more clearly revealed His presence with us than through the sending of His Son – the Lord Jesus Christ. If the Lord Jesus Christ is your shepherd, then all of the blessings of Psalm 23 are yours.

With that being said, before we can join in with this worship chorus, I want to ask one question:

### **Who Can Sing This Song?**

If you want to celebrate all of the blessings and privileges that David delights in here in Psalm 23, then you first need to be able to sing that opening line: The Lord is my shepherd.

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<sup>2</sup>W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 308.

Everything else that David goes on to describe – all of the confidence, the assurance, the provision, the blessing – it is all contingent on this first statement. David’s peace derives from this truth: The Lord is his shepherd.

David positions himself UNDER the leadership of the Good Shepherd so as to receive all of the blessings of God through Him. He submits himself to follow God wherever He might lead. Notice that David does not say, “The Lord is A Shepherd” or even, “The Lord is THE Shepherd.” No, David makes this personal by stating, “The Lord is MY Shepherd.”

I choose to follow him. I choose to surrender myself to His leadership. I wilfully confess that I belong to Him.

Does that sound familiar?

That sounds like the heart cry of every true Christian, doesn’t it? In order to lay hold of the grace of God we repent – that is to say – we turn away from being the self-appointed shepherds of our own lives and then we position ourselves under Jesus’ leadership. We accept his provision for us on the cross and we invite his leadership over our lives. The Apostle Paul wrote:

if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9 ESV)

So, I want to ask you a question this morning, and the answer to this question will make all the difference as to whether this Psalm contains any comfort for you: Have you surrendered your life to Jesus Christ? Is the Lord your Shepherd?

If He is, then every single one of the blessings we’re about to unpack is yours NOW and INCREASINGLY FOREVER! If he is, then you can sing this worship song with joy and gladness in your heart.

But if he is not, then you are on the outside looking in at these blessings. If that is you this morning, I have been praying that today would be the day that you would surrender your life to Jesus Christ. He is the Good Shepherd, and those who follow him receive his blessings.

So, Christian, I want to invite you to sing this worship song with me this morning.

## **Because the Lord Is My Shepherd**

Because the Lord is my Shepherd:

### **1. He will meet my needs**

We see that in verse 1:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1 ESV)

The NIV translates that phrase:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. (Psalm 23:1 NIV)

David is here marvelling in the reality that the God of the universe has pledged himself to be the provider for his people. David had spent his young adult life serving as a shepherd. As shepherd, it was his responsibility to plan ahead and to make sure that the flock was positioned in a place where they could graze to their hearts content. A failure to provide is a failure to shepherd. Sheep don't have the ability to plan ahead. Sheep will graze until they run out of food and then they will die. They are notoriously unintelligent animals. They are entirely dependent upon the shepherd's provision.

Here David is saying: "I am that sheep!" I wonder if anyone else ever feels that? We are notoriously wayward! We make foolish, self-destructive decisions on what feels like a daily basis. We cry out with David, "I am that sheep! But I shall not want because YOU are my Shepherd, and YOU will not fail me."

When the Good Shepherd walked among us, he reminded us of this incredible truth. Jesus looked out at the crowds who were following him, and he said:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup>Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matthew 6:25-26 ESV)

If the LORD is your shepherd, you shall not lack!

Now, before I move on, I want to clarify that God’s promise to provide for our needs should not be confused with a promise to provide for all of our wants. In fact, sometimes what we NEED is for God to take from us all of the lesser things that we waste our time striving for. William Plumer is very insightful here:

The Lord will give them every good thing, “every good cross, every good comfort,” every needed chastisement, every needed supply, all timely lessons, all good deliverances.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past month I have received a number of things that I NEEDED but that I never had the good sense to WANT. I suspect I’m not alone.

We mentioned last week that sometimes God WOUNDS us so as to HEAL us. Sometimes God reveals needs in our lives that we didn’t even know existed. He reveals them – and then he MEETS them! Amen? If the Lord is your Shepherd, he will not withhold from you anything that will further your ultimate good. The Apostle Paul said:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

If you have surrendered your life to Christ – if the Lord is your shepherd – then you can take that to the bank! That blessing is yours, and it will be yours forever.

Second, because the Lord is my Shepherd:

## **2. He will give me rest**

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<sup>3</sup> W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 309.

We see that in verses 2 and 3:

He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.  
<sup>3</sup> He restores my soul. (Psalm 23:2-3a ESV)

The challenge in preaching a Psalm is that it's almost like trying to describe with words how someone should feel as they listen to Handel's *Messiah*. Songs aren't meant to be divided and analyzed – they're meant to be sung and felt! Listen to the careful imagery in these verses. You can just imagine young David, having led his flock on an arduous journey, laying back in the grass as his sheep rest and refresh themselves beside the still waters. David is drawing from what is perhaps one of the sweetest memories from his past and he's saying: "That's what you do with me, God. Every moment of rest I have ever had is from you."

The idea of "rest" is filled with theological significance. From the seventh day of creation when God rested from His work to set an example for us, to the institution of the Sabbath, to the seventh year when even the land was to be given rest, God has been using the theme of rest to reveal Himself to His people. God designed us with a strategic deficiency. He designed us to NEED seasons of rest – seasons to put our striving on hold and to remember that we are ENTIRELY dependent upon the Lord.

If you've read your Bible, you know that God's people have been notoriously slow to learn this lesson. We are slow to rest because we are slow to trust and as a result, we deceive ourselves into believing that we can live our lives and maintain our relationship with God in our own strength.

Have you ever caught yourself living that way? Isn't it exhausting? Yet, into our weariness and our restlessness, the Good Shepherd came and proclaimed:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30 ESV)

The rest that we need is more than a physical rest – we are a spiritually exhausted people. We need spiritual rest, and only the Lord can meet that need. David takes comfort in the fact that the Lord

“restores his soul.” Now, there is a sense in which we should understand this as a reviving action. That is to say, God gives rest to the weary in order to RESTORE them to full strength. But this verb also conveys the idea of restoring that which was lost. The Lord goes after the straying heart and He brings them home! That sounds an awful lot like one of the parables that Jesus told, doesn't it? We find this story in Luke 15:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. <sup>6</sup> And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ <sup>7</sup> Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:1-7 ESV)

That is the heartbeat of our Shepherd. He is the restorer of souls. Don't you love him? Can you sing those words with David? Praise the God who RESTORES MY SOUL!

I believe with all my heart that the Good Shepherd is using this season of restlessness to restore some wandering souls to himself. I wonder if there aren't some weary, heavy-laden hearts listening in today who are finally recognizing how deeply they need the rest that Christ offers. It is a rest from striving. It is a rest from worry and from always needing to be in control. It is the rest that comes when we sing out in faith, “Jesus paid it all!”

Let's go on worshiping now. Because the Lord is my Shepherd:

### **3. He will keep and guide me**

Look again at verse 3:

He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake. (Psalm 23:3b ESV)

I want to stop here for a moment because I want to make sure that you see just how marvellously comforting that last phrase is!

If I could pull back the curtain and share a little bit of my personal story: One of the great fears in my life is that I will disappoint the people who have invested in me. In my teenage years, I was blessed to have a mentor pour heavily into my life because they saw something in me and wanted it to flourish. After years of investment, I proved myself to be unworthy of their efforts and the relationship ended in a ball of flames. To this day, when people seek to invest in me or to show me generosity, I feel a deep dread in my heart that they will eventually come to realize that I am not what they imagine me to be.

For a long time, I allowed that to distort my view of God. But here, we are reminded that God does not operate the way that we operate. He leads us for HIS name's sake.

Let me flesh that out for you this morning. His leadership in your life is not contingent upon your potential. God's love for you is not rooted in your performance. It's not as if God is going to discover one day that you are, in fact, a loser who is not worthy of His time. God sees the very worst parts of you RIGHT NOW! He sees the ugly stuff in you that you don't even see in yourself yet! He sees your past mistakes, your present pains, and even your future failures. And yet He is still committed to you! William Plumer writes:

That which moves God to save his people is found in him, not in them... If God found in himself cause for beginning our salvation, and if he never changes, then shall he find in himself cause for crowning with glory the work of salvation began in us. If he loved and pitied us when enemies, much more will he love and save us when friends.<sup>4</sup>

In the same vein, Charles Spurgeon said:

I am sure He would not have loved me so long if He had not been a changeless Lover. If he could grow weary of me, He would have been tired of me long before now.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 312.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening Devotions* (Lynchburg, VA: The Old-Time Gospel Hour), 117.



Isn't that good? Therefore, no matter what the road ahead entails, and no matter how unworthy I might feel, I am secure under the Good Shepherd's care. He has promised to KEEP me, and that promise is rooted in HIS name! It is guaranteed by HIS character! He will keep me, and he will never cease to be my guide.

And that is good news, because sometimes the path that we have to walk is frightening. We see that in verse 4:

<sup>4</sup>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. (Psalm 23:4 ESV)

We were just told in verse 3 that the Lord is the One who guides His people in paths of righteousness. In verse 4, we learn the uncomfortable truth that paths of righteousness inevitably pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Therefore, when David celebrates the blessing of the Lord's leadership in his life, he is NOT assuming that he will be spared from walking through the darkness – that would be naïve.

No, what David is celebrating is that the God who illuminates the darkness has promised to walk with us! God doesn't promise to take us out, but He promises to be with us and to bring us through. He doesn't promise the absence of darkness – he promises the uninterrupted presence of His light! And that makes all the difference! Alec Motyer makes this beautiful observation:

However black the next stretch of the journey through the valley may seem, verse 4 changes from the “he” of shepherd-leadership (verse 3) to the “you” of side-by-side companionship.<sup>6</sup>

Do you see that in the text? David has been using “He” language up until now. He's been talking about God in the third person. “The Lord is my shepherd... He makes me lie down. He leads me beside still waters.” But when you find yourself in the dark, it's not enough to speak ABOUT God. In those moments, you need to know that you can speak DIRECTLY TO God because He's with you. In the shadow of death, the REALITY of God's presence matters more than anything.

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<sup>6</sup> Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 61.

When you find yourself in the valley of the shadow of death, lift up your eyes to see the loving Shepherd who is still guiding your steps. See the rod and the staff that he uses to drive away your enemies. Know that you follow a Shepherd who has already suffered the grave and has come out victoriously on the other side! He is able to save to the uttermost. As William Plumer says:

Our shepherd walked through this valley in the days of his flesh. He entered the grave itself. He knows how necessary to our support is the divine presence, in our trials and in our dying agonies. If his people can look up and say to him, *Thou art with me*, they cannot yield to fear.<sup>7</sup>

Amen. He will keep me, and he will guide me. And, because the Lord is my Shepherd:

#### **4. He will vindicate me**

Look now at verse 5:

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies; (Psalm 23:5a ESV)

Here, David is shifting his imagery. He has moved from the pastoral language of a shepherd and his sheep and has moved to the language of hospitality in the home. Yet, this imagery of preparing a table conveys more than simply sharing a meal. The context suggests that the meal David is alluding to here is the meal that two parties share after ratifying a covenant.

Let me explain. If this were simply a meal, then David would still be in danger. Having a pizza with your big brother while a crowd of bullies waits outside the cafeteria might feel empowering for a moment, but once the pizza is done, you'll still need to leave the cafeteria. David is not celebrating a temporary reprieve – he is celebrating a lasting vindication.

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<sup>7</sup> W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 314.

This meal is more than a meal – it is representative of the relationship that David enjoys as God’s covenant partner. While this might seem foreign to us, covenant relationships were commonplace in the ancient world.

These covenants were not made between two equal parties. They were made between a dominant partner and a dependant partner. The agreement was complex but at its core it was essentially a commitment from the greater party that he would defend the lesser party for as long as the lesser party held up to his covenantal agreements.

And THAT is what this is. David’s enemies have been hot on his trail but when they find him, much to their horror, he is celebrating his covenant relationship with the God of the universe! If you mess with David, you mess with the Lord!

Now, this doesn’t mean that our enemies will go away. They are still there in verse 5 and they are still there in the New Testament. Jesus himself said:

In the world you will have tribulation. (John 16:33b ESV)

So, the promise is not that our enemies will suddenly VANISH. No, the promise is that God will stand for us against our enemies and that He will have the final word. That’s what Jesus goes on to say in John 16:

In the world you will have tribulation. **But take heart; I have overcome the world.**”  
(John 16:33b ESV)

The Devil will accuse you. The world will mock you. But when the dust settles, and the final score is tallied, your persecutors will discover with dismay that you have a place prepared for you at the table of the King of Kings, and they are outside with the dogs. So, we can sing:

The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him  
His rage we can endure, for lo his doom is sure  
One little word shall fell him!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I don't tremble in the presence of my enemies. God will have the final word! I will be vindicated! And finally, because the Lord is my shepherd:

## 5. He will bless me and bring me home

Look again at verse 5:

you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
forever. (Psalm 23:5b-6 ESV)

To anoint someone's head with oil was to symbolically set them apart. The priests, for example, would be anointed with oil so as to set them apart to serve in the temple. So too would the kings be anointed to symbolically set them apart for their royal responsibilities. It is a symbol of being distinguished and blessed by the God of the universe.

As David sits at this table, with anointing oil dripping off of his head, his cup is not simply full – it is overflowing! God is not stingy towards his people. He gives us all that we need, and then he gives us more! David sees a life that is filled with goodness and mercy now.

He also sees a future in which he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Derek Kidner notes:

So to be God's guest is to be more than an acquaintance, invited for a day. It is to live with him. There is a suggestion of pilgrimage in the picture of a progress that ends at *the house of the Lord*; but it is also a journey home<sup>9</sup>

If you are in Christ, then this is your hope! Blessings in part today, and blessings in full in the future!

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<sup>9</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 15; IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 130.

It has been my experience that Christians sometimes downplay the blessings that are ours today. We sometimes conduct ourselves as if our hope is ONLY in the next life. But here David reminds us that goodness and mercy follow him NOW!

Of course, his enemies are also following him. And the shadow of death lies before him. The blessings that we enjoy in this life are tainted by the effects of sin, but they are still worth celebrating! The Apostle Peter didn't attempt to downplay the hardships that his people would face in this life, but he also reminded them:

Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with **joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory** (1 Peter 1:8b ESV)

Things are not yet what they will be, but if we are in Christ then things are far more joyful than they were before! I want to invite you today to look for the goodness and the mercy in your life and to celebrate it! Let the way that we conduct ourselves communicate to the world that it is a joy to follow Jesus! We have blessing now, but of course, we understand the greatest blessing will come when we finally cross the finish line and take our place in the new heaven and the new earth.

It's hard for me to read these last verses of Psalm 23 without my mind immediately wandering to John 14. There, Jesus said:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to where I am going. <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:1-6 ESV)

Psalm 23 teaches us that our Shepherd loves us, is with us, is for us, and will ultimately lead us home. And, thanks be to God, the way home has now been made clear to us. The way home is through Jesus Christ – the Good Shepherd who lays his life down for his sheep. If you are in right relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ, then this is a song that you need to sing. David wrote this song 1000 years before Jesus came to us. Can you imagine the Psalm 23 that David wrote on THIS side of the cross seeing what we see and knowing what we know?!

Do you feel your sense of need this morning? In Jesus we find ultimate provision. All of the promises of God are “yes” and “amen” in Christ.

Do you feel tired and weary? In Jesus we find lasting rest. He came to do for us what we could never do for ourselves and to pay for what we did do in his body on the cross.

Do you feel like you are in danger of falling away? In Jesus we find the one who keeps us to the end. He said:

While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost (John 17:12a ESV)

Do you feel lost? In Jesus we find the one who guides us. In the same way that he called out to the first disciples, “Follow me!” he calls out to us again. He is the only one worth following because he is the way, the truth and the life.

Do you feel harassed and helpless? In Jesus we have vindication. He has silenced the mouth of our accuser and knocked the sword out of our enemy’s hand.

Do you feel a longing in your soul for something more? In Jesus, all of the blessings of God have been unlocked. He offers us strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow.

For these reasons and 10,000 more, let’s lift our voices and sing to the Lord who has so richly provided us with everything that we need! All of these blessings and more are yours if the Lord is your Shepherd.

This is our hope! This is our song! And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray together.