

Hope in Troubled Times

The Lord Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23:1-6

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Scripture

On Sunday, March 22, 2020, we started having Virtual Fellowship Services using Zoom videoconferencing. On that Sunday, I said that I was going to suspend my series on “The Life of David” and begin a series of meditations that I called, “Hope in Troubled Times.” This is the last in that series of meditations, because we plan to resume corporate worship services this coming Lord’s Day on Sunday, May 31, 2020, at which time I shall continue my series on “The Life of David.”

As we conclude our meditations on “Hope in Troubled Times,” I would like to look at Psalm 23. One commentator said of Psalm 23, “It is the most-prominent, the most-loved, the most-used, the most-preached on and the most-written-upon, of all psalms. Ten thousands of people have memorized this psalm.”¹ Perhaps you too have memorized Psalm 23.

Please follow along as I read Psalm 23:1-6:

A Psalm of David.

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

**²He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.**

**³He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.**

**⁴Even 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.**

¹ Roy E. Gingrich, *The Book of Psalms (Book One)* (Memphis, TN: Riverside Printing, 2005), 34.

⁵You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever. (Psalm 23:1-6)

Introduction

The superscription of Psalm 23 says that it is **“A Psalm of David.”** Many think that David wrote this psalm as a young teenager, when he was a shepherd. As he was taking care of his father’s sheep, lying on his back in a lush green field beside a gently flowing stream, he penned the words of this memorable psalm. However, it is far more likely that David wrote this psalm late in his life, possibly during the rebellion of his son Absalom (2 Samuel 13-19). As David looked back over his very difficult and tumultuous life, while facing a current crisis, he wrote the words of Psalm 23.

This psalm is often used at funerals. While it is appropriate at such a time, it is really a psalm about the Lord’s provision for his people, especially during times of great difficulty.

In 1970, W. Phillip Keller wrote a book titled, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. I highly commend this book to you. It is a rich study from the perspective of a shepherd on Psalm 23. His writing has informed much of my meditation today.

Lesson

Psalm 23:1-6 shows us the Lord’s provision for his people. Let’s use the following outline:

1. My Relationship to the Lord (23:1a)
2. My Provision from the Lord (23:1b-6)

I. My Relationship to the Lord (23:1a)

First, let's look at my relationship to the Lord.

David writes in verse 1a, **“The Lord is my shepherd.”**

Who is **“the Lord”**? Who is this one who is **“my shepherd”**? What credentials does he have to be my shepherd, my owner, my manager?

David was of course referring to Jehovah, the supreme, sovereign, almighty, all-powerful, omniscient, creator God of Israel.

It was this **Lord** whom David called **“my shepherd.”** James Montgomery Boice writes:

In Israel, as in other ancient societies, a shepherd's work was considered the lowest of all works. If a family needed a shepherd, it was always the youngest son, like David, who got this unpleasant assignment. Shepherds had to live with the sheep twenty-four hours a day, and the task of caring for them was unending. Day and night, summer and winter, in fair weather and foul, they labored to nourish, guide, and protect the sheep. Who in his right mind would choose to be a shepherd?

Yet Jehovah has chosen to be our shepherd, David says. The great God of the universe has stooped to take just such care of you and me.²

Furthermore, when Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, was ministering on earth, he said of himself, **“I am the good shepherd.”** Listen to how Jesus put it in John 10:

¹“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. ²But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

² James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 1–41: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 207–208.

⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.... ¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd (10:1-5; 11-16).

When I put my trust in Jesus and repented of my sin on Easter Sunday in 1976, he became **“my shepherd.”** So, it is entirely appropriate for me to read verse 1 and say, **“The Lord [Jesus] is my shepherd.”** I belong to Jesus and he is my shepherd.

Are you able to say that too? **“The Lord is my shepherd.”**

II. My Provision from the Lord (23:1b-6)

And second, let's examine my provision from the Lord.

David writes in verse 1b, **“I shall not want.”** In other words, David is saying, “I shall lack nothing.”

Sheep are apparently not very bright, and are tremendously needy and dependent upon the shepherd for their proper care. Unlike many other animals, they do not fend well for themselves.

But the good shepherd takes such good care of his sheep that they lack nothing. The hired hand does not care very well at all for the sheep under his care. Keller writes:

In memory I can still see one of the sheep ranches in our district that was operated by a tenant sheepman [that is, a hired

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hand]. He ought never to have been allowed to keep sheep. His stock were always thin, weak, and riddled with disease or parasites. Again and again they would come and stand at the fence staring blankly through the woven wire at the green lush pastures that my flock enjoyed. Had they been able to speak, I am sure they would have said, “Oh, to be set free from this awful owner!”

This is a picture that has never left my memory. It is a picture of pathetic people the world over who have not known what it is to belong to the Good Shepherd... who suffer instead under sin and Satan.³

Because Jesus is my good shepherd, **“I shall not want.”** There is nothing that I lack. Let me show you what I shall not lack.

A. I Shall Not Lack Rest (23:2a)

First, I shall not lack rest.

Verse 2a says, **“He makes me lie down in green pastures.”** Keller notes that it is impossible for sheep to lie down unless four requirements are met. He writes:

Owing to their timidity they refuse to lie down unless they are free of all fear.

Because of the social behavior within a flock, sheep will not lie down unless they are free from friction with others of their kind.

If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. Only when free of these pests can they relax.

Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. They must be free from hunger.⁴

Fear. Friction. Flies. Hunger. Each of these anxieties must be addressed satisfactorily before the sheep will lie down and rest.

³ W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), n.p.

⁴ W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, n.p.

My dear friend, we who belong to Jesus are like sheep. We too struggle with fears, friction among ourselves, torments from external pests, and even lack of basic needs. We find ourselves restless and unable to rest.

Keller goes on to note that “it is only the shepherd himself who can provide release from these anxieties.”⁵ And in just the same way, it is only our Good Shepherd Jesus who provides us with release from these anxieties. But, take note, as a Good Shepherd, he does take care of all our anxieties so that we may rest. In one of the most precious of all Jesus’ promises, our Good Shepherd has said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

O, my dear brother and sister, go to Jesus. He *will* give you rest. He *will* take care of your fears, the friction you have with others, the torments you experience from the outside, and all your basic needs. He will provide rest for you and me.

B. I Shall Not Lack Refreshment (23:2b)

Second, I shall not lack refreshment.

Verse 2b says, **“He leads me beside still waters.”** Note that the key to providing water does not lie with the sheep but with the shepherd. The shepherd knows where the best water is to be found, and sometimes works hard to make sure that the water is drinkable. Thirsty sheep will drink whatever putrid water they see but they may pick up internal parasites that will damage them.

Our Good Shepherd once said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37). To drink from Jesus means to believe in him and to have an ongoing personal relationship with him in which we are drawing life-giving refreshment from him.

How do we do that? We spend time with him in his Word. We talk to him in prayer. We do what he tells us in his Word.

⁵ W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, n.p.

C. *I Shall Not Lack Restoration (23:3a)*

Third, I shall not lack restoration.

Verse 3 says, **“He restores my soul.”** As we study this psalm we must always keep in mind that it is a sheep in the Good Shepherd’s care who is speaking. It is a Christian believer talking about his relationship with his Savior. So, what is meant by the statement, **“He restores my soul”**?

In Psalm 42:11, the psalmist cries out, “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God...” Keller notes that shepherds sometimes have to take care of a “cast” or a “cast down” sheep. He says that “this is an old English shepherd’s term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up again by itself.... The way it happens is this: A heavy, fat, or long-fleeced sheep will lie down comfortably in some little hollow or depression in the ground. It may roll on its side slightly to stretch out or relax. Suddenly the center of gravity in the body shifts so that it turns on its back far enough that the feet no longer touch the ground. It may feel a sense of panic and start to paw frantically. Frequently this only makes things worse. It rolls over even further. Now it is quite impossible for it to regain its feet.”⁶ Gases build up in the sheep’s body, cutting off circulation to the legs, and it is only a few hours before the sheep dies. The only one who can restore the sheep is the shepherd.

Sometimes I am like a cast sheep. I am doing fine but, suddenly, I lose my spiritual equilibrium. I thrash about crying out for help. And then my Good Shepherd comes to me, like he did with Peter after Peter had denied Jesus with oaths and cursing (Matthew 26:72, 74), and he restores my soul. He sets me up straight. He lets me know that I am okay and that he cares for me.

⁶ W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, n.p.

D. I Shall Not Lack Guidance (23:3b)

Fourth, I shall not lack guidance.

Verse 3b says, **“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”** Sheep do not manage themselves well at all. They require constant care and help. Left to themselves, sheep will follow the same trails until they become ruts, graze in the same fields until they become like deserts, drink polluted water until they become diseased, and wander off until they become lost.

A competent shepherd will take his sheep to a certain pasture so that they are able to get the best grazing. He will pay careful attention to the grass and move them to the next pasture so that the first pasture has time to rebuild itself once again and yield the best, lush grass.

David captures the idea of leading the sheep not just in a straight way but in the “right” path, that is, in “righteous” paths.

I stray into trouble and sin when I go my own way. But, my Good Shepherd leads me in paths of righteousness. And when I pay attention and hear his voice (which I hear when I read his Word), I can walk in paths of righteousness.

E. I Shall Not Lack Courage (23:4)

Fifth, I shall not lack courage.

Verse 4 says, **“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.”** This is the verse that is particularly used at funerals or to comfort those who are dying, and it is not wrong to do so. However, this verse speaks about the shepherd’s ability to protect his sheep during times of danger. Keller notes that in many parts of the world shepherds take their sheep seasonally from the lowlands in the winter, through the valleys to high pastures, where they go in summer.

The valleys are places of rich pasture and good water, but they are also places of much danger. Wild animals lurk in the crannies of the mountainous walls. There are many shadows in the valleys, and so danger lurks **“in the valley of the shadow of death.”** But, so long as the shepherd is watching over the sheep, they feel safe. In fact, the sheep says, **“I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”**

It is important to note that **“the valley of the shadow of death”** is as much the right path as the “green pastures” and the “still waters.” Sometimes my Good Shepherd leads me through difficult places. Life is not always a bed of roses. Sometimes it is hard. Sometimes there are trials and difficulties and dangers.

Yet, I need not fear. Why? Because my Good Shepherd is with me. Therefore, I have courage.

F. I Shall Not Lack Provision (23:5)

Sixth, I shall not lack provision.

Verse 5 says, **“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”** Some commentators say that this verse switches the imagery from a shepherd and his sheep to a host and his guest. That may be right. But I do think Keller may also be right when he suggests that a high pasture in some parts of the world is called a “mesa,” which is the Spanish word for “table.” The best example of a high pasture is Table Mountain in Cape Town, South Africa. Keller says that the shepherd will prepare the table as the summer pasture for his sheep by removing physical hazards, destroying poisonous plants, and driving predators away. Moreover, the shepherd will use a mixture of olive oil and other ingredients to put on the head of his sheep to protect his sheep from insects.

My Good Shepherd leads me to a table that he has prepared for me. He will clear out the hazards and the enemies that want to

hurt me. He will apply the healing balm of his love to my head so that I protected from outside attackers. I have a Good Shepherd!

G. I Shall Not Lack Love (23:6a)

Seventh, I shall not lack love.

Verse 6a says, **“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”** The hired hand does not really care about the sheep because they do not belong to him. But, the Good Shepherd loves his sheep. He watches over them constantly to make sure that they are safe and protected and have all that they need. And the sheep sense the goodness and mercy (which in Hebrew is “steadfast love”) from the shepherd.

My Good Shepherd loves me, and will do so all the days of my life.

H. I Shall Not Lack Housing (23:6b)

And finally, I shall not lack housing.

Verse 6b says, **“... and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”** Summer has come to an end and so has fall. The shepherd now leads his sheep back home, where they will spend the winter. Secure in the shepherd’s care, they will spend the winter in the shelter of his home.

My Good Shepherd will lead me and bring me to my eternal home, where I will be with him forever.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Psalm 23:1-6, be sure that you can say, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

Our Good Shepherd has gone to prepare a place for us. Trust in the One who is able to take care of us forever. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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