

# The Good Shepherd

*Psalm 23:1–6*

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## The Ancient Practice of Shepherding

We are currently making our way through the book of Psalms on Sunday mornings, and today we come to one of the most beloved passages in all of Scripture — Psalm 23. It is arguably the most well-known chapter in the Bible. It appears on greeting cards, it is read at funerals, it is the subject of countless books, and it is highlighted in more Bibles than perhaps any other passage. As it should be.

Psalm 23 is a beautiful psalm that moves from stating theological truths about God — “He makes me lie down in green pastures” — to those truths becoming deeply personal: “You are with me.” It traces the journey from what is known about God in the mind to what becomes real in the heart. That is my prayer for you today: that what you already know to be true would become true in a new and deeper way.

Psalm 23 begins, *A Psalm of David*. And then immediately: *The LORD is my shepherd*. Because this psalm is so beloved and so widely known, hundreds of books have been written on these six verses. The most popular is Phillip Keller’s *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, and I recommend it — it is a wonderful devotional. But for all its insight, Keller was a modern shepherd. His sheep were kept in gated pastures. He slept in a warm bed while his flock slept under the stars. He did not carry a rod and a staff, nor did he lead his sheep to water — he trained them to drink from a watering trough. To truly understand what it means to say and believe *the LORD is my shepherd*, we need to view shepherding through its ancient practice.

For me, that education came when my wife Christie and I lived with a semi-nomadic tribe called the Rendille, in Kenya’s Chalbi Desert. When we were first married, we lived in a place called Kargi, where the women and children stayed in small, mobile villages while the men shepherded their flocks many days’ walk away. Those shepherds had no fenced pens, no watering troughs, no feed supply. They wandered for weeks at a time searching for water and grass for their sheep and other livestock. They had no guns to defend against lions, hyenas, and cheetahs. What they did carry was a rod and a staff.

These are the shepherds we should use as our lens for reading Psalm 23. And fortunately, you do not need to travel to Africa to study them. You can read about shepherds just like them in the book of Genesis.

One of the great recurring themes in Genesis is the image of the shepherd. It begins with God entrusting Adam with responsibility over the animals. Abel becomes a keeper of sheep. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob live as shepherds, and their journeys, their conflicts, and even their family relationships unfold around the search for pasture, the securing of water, and the care of their animals. We see the full demands of this life most clearly in Jacob. In Genesis 31, he reminds his father-in-law Laban of the years he spent caring for his flocks:

*“These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself. From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes.” (Genesis 31:38–40)*

Shepherding was not a leisure activity. A shepherd had to find food and water, watch over the mothers and their young, guard against wild animals and thieves, attend to the weak, and lead at a pace the flock could endure. And to do all of that, a shepherd had to surrender his own comfort — to walk the same ground his sheep walked, to endure the same weather, the same dark nights, the same dangers.

So it is no surprise that after these stories of shepherds run through the entire book of Genesis, at the very end of the book, when Jacob is on his deathbed and giving his final testimony to his family, this is what he says:

*“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day.” (Genesis 48:15)*

The man whom God himself named Israel testifies that the LORD has been his shepherd — that throughout his long and difficult life, the Lord provided for him, watched over him, protected him, cared for him, led him to places of peace and rest, and has been beside him every step of the way. And that is precisely what David is saying at the opening of Psalm 23. *The LORD is my shepherd.*

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## **The Shepherd Provides — Verses 1–3**

With that background in mind, let us read the psalm from the beginning.

*A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. (Psalm 23:1–3)*

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.* Another way to translate that final phrase is simply: I am not in need. I do not lack. Why? Because the Shepherd provides what I cannot provide for myself.

One thing Phillip Keller's book does very well is describe what a sheep is actually like. He describes sheep as foolish, helpless, and nearly hopeless. A sheep is, at its core, a walking wool coat with no claws, no fangs, and no intimidating roar — wandering through a world full of animals looking for dinner. And according to Keller, a sheep can have perfectly good pasture all around it and still be convinced that the grass on the other side of the fence must be better. The shepherd has provided dinner, water, and protection, and the sheep is standing there thinking, *You know what would improve my life? Getting out of here.* Sheep are also easily frightened. One sheep starts running and suddenly everyone is running — no meeting called, no facts checked, just a unanimous, bewildered sprint. And sometimes a sheep simply rolls onto its back and cannot get up. Keller calls that a “cast” sheep: four legs in the air, a whole field of grass around it, waiting for someone to come and turn it over. Even taking a nap can become a rescue operation.

It is no wonder the Prophet Isaiah describes us with exactly this image: “*All we like sheep have gone astray*” (Isaiah 53:6). Sheep need a shepherd. And praise God — the LORD is my shepherd.

As the shepherd, *he makes me lie down in green pastures.* Another way to say it: he causes me to rest. True rest is a gift from the Shepherd. I can rest because of who the Shepherd is and what he does for me.

*He leads me beside still waters.* The Hebrew word for “leads” here carries the sense of gentle leading — not driving, not pushing, but a patient, tender walk alongside. And the phrase translated “still waters” literally means *waters of rest*. David is not describing the speed of the current; he is describing the character of the destination — a place of refreshment and peace, reached only through the Shepherd's leading. A sheep may know that it is thirsty, but it does not know where to find water. It only finds the place of rest by following the shepherd who knows the terrain, the distance, and the way. The shepherd does not remove the wilderness. He knows how to lead his sheep through it.

*He restores my soul.* The word “restore” means to make whole, to bring back. Isaiah 40:11 is a beautiful picture of this verse in action: “*He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.*” Notice the shepherd's response to those who cannot keep up. He does not stand at a distance and shout, *Hurry up.* He goes to them. He cares for them. If necessary, he carries them. Jesus draws on exactly this image when he explains to the religious leaders why he eats with sinners and tax collectors (Luke 15:1–7). The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one who is lost, and he brings it home rejoicing. *He restores my soul.*

*He leads me in paths of righteousness.* Notice that the shepherd does not point to the right path and send the sheep ahead — he leads them on it. The Shepherd goes before me. My responsibility is not to know the way, but to trust the One who does. And sometimes, as we are about to see in verse 4, the right path leads through some very dark valleys.

But before we get there, pause and take in what David has declared about the LORD as shepherd:

He provides what I cannot provide for myself. He causes me to rest. He restores me and brings me back when I am weary and lost. He knows the right paths, even when I cannot see where they lead.

And notice how verse 3 ends: the Shepherd does all of this “for his name’s sake.” The LORD cares for us because of who he is. His name represents his character — his goodness, his faithfulness, his love. His care for his sheep is an outflow of his character. When he cares for his flock, his goodness is revealed, his faithfulness is displayed, and his name is glorified. The sheep receive the blessing, but the Shepherd receives the glory.

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## The Shepherd Draws Near — Verse 4

We now come to a turning point in the psalm. In verses 1–3, David has been telling us things about God — third person, declarative, theological: *he provides, he causes me to rest, he restores, he leads*. Now, in verse 4, something changes. David stops speaking about God and turns to speak directly to him. The language shifts from “he” to “you.” God is no longer the subject of David’s description; he is the object of David’s address.

And this pivot — from knowing about God to knowing God — happens precisely at a moment of great darkness.

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)

The Hebrew word translated “shadow of death” is *tsalmavet* — a word deliberately chosen to express the deepest, darkest experiences of life. It certainly includes death itself, but it also encompasses everything that casts its shadow: a frightening diagnosis, the heartbreak of a broken relationship, the grief of losing someone you love, a season of profound uncertainty or need, the valleys of depression, self-doubt, and despair. These are all valleys of deep darkness.

And when you are in one of those valleys, it is hard to see what lies on the other side of the hill. It is hard to know how you will get through. It is here — in this very place — that the Lord draws nearest to David. *You are with me*. The valley is real. The danger is real. The pain

is real. But so is the presence of the Shepherd. And because the Shepherd is present, we too can say: *I will fear no evil. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Notice what the Shepherd takes and what he gives. He takes David's fear and gives him comfort. And the instruments of that exchange are the rod and the staff — the traditional tools of the ancient shepherd. The staff was used for care and guidance, offering a gentle nudge to keep the sheep on the path. The rod was the weapon the shepherd carried to defend his flock against predators. Over time, in many cultures, the rod became a symbol of authority and power — the scepter a king holds.

This exchange of fear for comfort is ultimately what Christ has done for us. But he did not simply take our fear and give us comfort. He took our sin and gave us the righteousness of God. He took our condemnation and gave us mercy and grace. He took our shame and guilt and gave us his forgiveness and acceptance. He took our alienation from the Father and gave us the right to be called children of God. And he took our death and gave us his life everlasting.

The rod and the staff of the shepherd become, for us, the cross of Calvary. That is where the exchange is made. It is there that our sin, our condemnation, and our death become his — and his life, his righteousness, and his fellowship become ours. And it is that fellowship we see in the final two verses of the psalm.

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## The Shepherd Brings Us Home — Verses 5–6

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 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 23:5–6)*

Notice where the table is prepared: *in the presence of my enemies*. If you have studied the life of David, you know that enemies surrounded him for the entirety of his life. When he was young, his own family would rebuke him and overlook him. After he slew Goliath, the king himself sought to take his life. When he finally became king, the kingdom was divided by civil war. Later, his own sons rebelled against him. His entire life was lived in the midst of enemies. And yet, even in the worst of those times, the Lord was there — providing a feast.

Some of you may need to hear that today. The enemies you are facing may be real people who seek your loss and harm — conflict at work, tension in the family, unresolved anger. Or your enemies may be enemies of the soul: fear, shame, condemnation, pride, failure — all that junk that hangs around and does no good in your life. Even among these enemies, the Lord prepares a table to nurture your soul, to refresh your spirit, and to draw you near to him.

And look at how he provides: *you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows*. The anointing of the head with oil was an honor extended to a cherished guest. Jesus does not merely tolerate you at his table — he honors you. You are welcomed. You are wanted. And he gives not just barely enough, but an abundance so great it overflows: grace upon grace.

Then David — a man who spent his entire life being pursued by those who sought his harm — makes a remarkable declaration in verse 6. He says, in effect: *This is how God pursues me*. Goodness and mercy are chasing him down. No matter how far he has run, no matter how low he has fallen, no matter how confusing life has become, the Lord pursues him with goodness and mercy — and not just for a season, but *all the days of my life*.

And the psalm could end there. It would be enough. But it does not end there. The end of a life is not the end of life. There is a *forever*: *I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever*. The Shepherd who restored my soul in verse 3 brings me all the way home in verse 6.

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## **Do You Know His Voice?**

Out in the Chalbi Desert, a Rendille shepherd cannot build a fence around his flock. What holds the sheep together is his voice. They know him because they have lived with him, followed him, and been rescued by him day after day.

Jesus said: *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand”* (John 10:27–28).

Many of us could recite Psalm 23 from memory. But the question this morning is not whether you know Psalm 23. The question is whether the Shepherd is *your* shepherd. Do you know his voice?

Perhaps you have never made Jesus your shepherd. You have known about him, maybe for years, but you have been trying to find the way on your own. The invitation of this psalm is simple: stop wandering and start following. Turn to the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for you, and trust him to lead you home.

Perhaps you know the Shepherd, but you are in a valley right now — a diagnosis, a loss, a fear you cannot shake. Hear this: you are not walking it alone. He is with you. The same Shepherd who walked through death is walking beside you, and goodness and mercy are chasing you down.

Or perhaps you have simply drifted, the way sheep do, toward the grass on the other side of the fence. The Shepherd is not standing at a distance yelling, *Hurry up*. He is coming after you — with goodness and mercy. I invite you to hear his voice today, and follow him.