

THEISM

The Lord Is My Shepherd

The Twenty-third Psalm, which describes God as shepherd, is probably the best-loved and most memorized chapter in the Bible. This psalm's strong affirmation of faith has driven away grief, sadness, and doubt. People who have the psalmist's confidence are blessed with peace, contentment, and trust. The author of this psalm uses shepherd imagery to describe God as provider, protector, and preserver of life. These descriptions are also presented in the New Testament in relation to Christ's role as a shepherd (John 10:11, 14; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 5:4).

God, as shepherd, provides the wants of his sheep (v. 1). He guides them "in the wilderness" (Psalm 78:52). He feeds them, carries them in his bosom, and gently leads the young (Isaiah 40:11). He seeks out those who have strayed away from the flock (Ezekiel 34:11-12). Under the care of such a shepherd, sheep realize the fulfillment of all their wants. (Psalm 34:9-10; Matthew 6:30-31; Luke 12:22-32; Romans 5:7-11; Philippians 4:19; Revelation 7:16-17). Sheep follow their shepherd because they hear his voice (Psalm 95:7-8; John 10:4). In a general way, those who entrust themselves to God understand that they have their needs supplied.

More specifically, the psalmist describes four ways that God, as shepherd, meets his needs. The first two are physical. The last two are spiritual. First, "**He makes me lie down in green pastures,**" i.e., places of coolness and rest (v. 2). This is a picture of safety, satisfaction, and contentment. Sheep are defenseless. They do not lie down when being stalked, or when hungry. They lie down after having satisfied themselves from eating. The shepherd's guidance enables them to rest. Jesus said, "Come unto me . . . and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Second, "**He leads me beside the still waters**" (v. 2). Sheep do not drink from gurgling streams. Safety demands that they not allow their wool to be drenched in water. They must have quiet pools from which to drink. If still water is not available, the shepherd fashions with his hands a quiet pool from a flowing stream to allow sheep to drink in safety. The calmness of life in the Lord is described in the eternal scene where "the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters" (Revelation 7:17).

Third, "**He restores my soul**" (v. 3). When sheep go astray, they become lost and subject to danger unless found by the shepherd. When found, a lost sheep is not only restored to the flock, but is also emotionally revived. To the Laodiceans, the Lord said, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent" (Revelation 3:19). Because God loves wayward sons, he chastises them (Hebrews 12:5-11). Lost sheep are not only sought by the Lord, but also when found, abide in peace when they follow the Great Shepherd. The bond between a shepherd and his sheep is an intimate and affectionate one with the shepherd as an overseer (1 Peter 2:25).

Fourth, "**He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake**" (v. 3). A good shepherd knows the right paths on which to bring sheep home safely without losing any. This he faithfully does partly because of his reputation, in accordance with his revealed character (See Psalms 5:8; 31:3; 1 Corinthians 10:13).

God, as shepherd, so protects his sheep that they need not fear their enemies (v. 4). He leads them in safety through dangerous situations. Defenseless sheep can, without fear, entrust their shepherd to direct their way, even "through the valley of the shadow of death" (v. 4). There is a ravine south of the Jericho Road that leads from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea that shepherds call the Valley of the Shadow of Death. This narrow defile, four and a half miles long, runs through a

mountainous range where overhanging cliffs may be as much as 1500 feet high. There sheep traverse the valley floor which may be very dangerous because it is subject to erosion by cloud bursts. At times there are gullies seven or eight feet deep where wild dogs may lurk to prey on the sheep. The psalmist affirms his faith in God, his shepherd, by promising not to be afraid, even in the most dreadful circumstances likened to that of sheep passing through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. This sense of safety in the presence of the Lord is also declared in another psalm. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1).

More specifically, the psalmist declares how God, as shepherd, frees him from fear. First, **“For You are with me”** (v. 4). God declared through the prophet Isaiah that He was with Israel (43:1-7). The psalmist acknowledged that God was with him (16:8). The author of Hebrews exhorted his readers, with the assurance that God was with them (13:5-6).

Second, **“Your rod and your staff, they comfort me”** (v. 4). The shepherd used his rod and staff to defend his sheep from preying animals and to lift them from whatever pit they may have fallen into. Though the rod and staff were used as weapons against enemies, they could be understood by sheep as articles of comfort.

Third, **“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies”** (v. 5). Probably the most common enemies of sheep were poisonous plants within their grazing area. The task of the shepherd was to find such plants, grub them out, and lay them on stones to dry, thus keeping the sheep from eating them. In that fashion, the shepherd protected the sheep by preparing their feeding area, i.e., their “table,” in the presence of their enemies.

Fourth, **“You anoint my head with oil, my cup runs over”** (v. 5). At the end of the day, when sheep come into the enclosed sheepfold, the shepherd is at the doorway to examine each sheep. When an animal has briar scratches, cuts, or bruises, the shepherd anoints the wounds with oil and gives each sheep a soothing drink from a stone cup, which spills over when a sheep dips its nose into it. The cup running over indicates an abundance of refreshment. The shepherd is thus not only a provider and protector, but one who genuinely cares about his sheep. So God, as shepherd, provides, protects, and cares for his flock.

God, as shepherd, so preserves his sheep that the psalmist feels assured of constant association with him (cf., Psalm 27:13; 31:19; 69:16; 86:17; 109:21; 116:12; 142:7; 145:7). Because the shepherd is good, **“surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,”** i.e., to the end of my days (v. 6). In the presence of such a shepherd, sheep surely feel at peace, contented, and trusting. In the presence of Christ, our shepherd, Christians should feel the same way. “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1-3)

Because God is shepherd, the psalmist felt assured to declare **“And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”** (v. 6). The house of the Lord is the abiding place of the Great Shepherd where one may have full communion with the Shepherd. What more could anyone desire than to have a shepherd who forever provides for one’s wants, who protects from grave dangers, and who preserves his flock because he is good and merciful?