

# PSALM 23

YAHWEH MY SHEPHERD

# Introduction

- ▶ Perhaps the most well-known passages in the Bible
- ▶ Spurgeon: “pearl of the psalms” & “nightingale of the psalms”
- ▶ Recognized and beloved by believers and unbelievers like
- ▶ “In spite of its frequent use by worshipping communities little time is given to discovering its full meaning” (Ross, 555).

# Genre

- ▶ Difficult to classify by genre
- ▶ Doesn't fit easily into any major classification
- ▶ Best description: **a psalm of confidence**
- ▶ "The psalm is primarily a meditation on the spiritual and physical provision of the LORD. Through the example of David the psalm invites believers to meditate on the many manifestations of the loyal love of the LORD and thereby renew their communion with him in his sanctuary" (Ross, 571).
- ▶ "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 homes towards no material goal but to the Lord himself" (Kidner, 127).

# Interpretive Issues

- ▶ Familiarity – don't we already know what this means?
- ▶ Tradition – traditional translations color our perception of its meaning
- ▶ Metaphor
  - ▶ Extent – does the shepherd metaphor continue through the whole psalm, or change?
  - ▶ Scope – how much do we try to make a metaphor “walk on all fours”?
  - ▶ Detail – is every detail in a metaphor important for doctrine?

# Interpretive Issues

Mays, *Psalms*, 115-16:

- ▶ “In a metaphor something is said to be something else that it obviously and literally is not. A word used as a metaphor brings all that it denotes and connotes in ordinary language to the explication of that to which it is related. A metaphor used for theological purposes is very serious business. It does not simply describe by comparisons; it identifies by equation.”
- ▶ “A metaphor becomes the image as which and through which something or someone is known and understood. It conveys more, and it speaks more powerfully than is possible to do in discursive speech. A metaphor is not as precise and limited as discursive speech. It draws on varied experience and evokes imagination. It is therefore plastic in meaning, capable of polysemy.”
- ▶ “The opening metaphorical statement is a signal that the whole psalm is composed in a metaphorical idiom. That is one of the reasons for its poetic power and perdurance as a poem of faith.”

# Interpretive Issues

What is the purpose of metaphor?

- ▶ Poetry – using an economy of language to communicate much with little
- ▶ Concrete – they explain the abstract using sense-related images
- ▶ Surprising – most effective when fresh and unfamiliar

Psalms 23 – a conventionalized metaphor

- ▶ Takes a familiar image (shepherd) and applies it to something abstract (Yahweh)
- ▶ Details of vv. 2-4 reinforce details of metaphor
- ▶ ***In other words, the details of the psalm are the key to recognizing its extent***

# Setting

- ▶ Original setting impossible to ascertain
- ▶ Contextual setting – sits in the center of a trilogy of psalms:

<b>Psalm</b>	<b>Psalm 22</b>	<b>Psalm 23</b>	<b>Psalm 24</b>
<b>Person</b>	Servant	Shepherd	Sovereign
<b>Ministry</b>	Suffering	Providing	Reigning
<b>Time</b>	Past	Present	Future
<b>Symbol</b>	Cross	Crook	Crown

# Structure

- ▶ Depends on extent of shepherd metaphor
- ▶ Traditional structure:
  - ▶ Yahweh as Shepherd (23:1-4)
  - ▶ Yahweh as Host (23:5-6)
- ▶ Nontraditional – shepherd metaphor continues for entire psalm
- ▶ Shepherd and Host metaphors share key parallels which unite the psalm:

Metaphor	SHEPHERD	HOST
Location	Open field	Tent
Instruments	Rod & staff	Goodness & loyal love
Scene	Pasture, water, restoration	Table, ointment, wine
Adversity	“the valley of the shadow of death”	“my enemies”

# Structure

- ▶ Modified traditional structure: meditations on God's provision and protection:
  - ▶ Yahweh's Provision and Protection as Shepherd (23:1-4)
  - ▶ Yahweh's Provision as Protection as Host (23:5)
  - ▶ Concluding Meditation on Metaphors (23:6)

# Verse 1

Davidic authorship has been challenged:

- Psalm of hope for exiles cut off from homeland
- Royal coronation ritual
- Pilgrimage psalm

A psalm by David

Authorship is key to setting:

- David's life fits perfectly well with details
- David was a shepherd
- He spent much time in wilderness
- He experienced numerous occasions of God's provision and protection
- **David's life as shepherd provides clear basis for**

Yahweh

my shepherd

I do not lack

Opening phrase is a "nominal clause"

- no verb – grammar implies "is"
- extreme economy of language – 2 Hebrew words

Yahweh is the focus of the entire psalm

- It occurs 2x – beginning and end (vv. 1, 6)
- **Forms an inclusion bracketing the entire psalm**

taphor

# Verse

Main metaphor introduced

"In the word *shepherd*, David uses the most comprehensive and intimate metaphor yet

"The fundamental points expressed in the metaphor are the interrelated dimensions of *protection* and *provision*. Yet the metaphor is pregnant with meaning; it is not merely a picture drawn randomly from nature to illustrate the character of the relationship between God and the psalmist. It is a metaphor drawing on the ancient resources of the Hebrew tradition; thus the psalmist, in utilizing the metaphor, is linking his thought to a broader concept, namely that of God who had been experienced as shepherd by many persons over many generations. And the metaphor is loaded in another sense, too; the terminology of the metaphor associates it with the Exodus from Egypt and the Hebrews' travels in the wilderness, when God's provision and protection had been known like that of a shepherd. Thus, in a subtle fashion, the psalmist is expressing confidence and trust in such a manner that his sentiments are linked to the great acts of divine salvation of the past, which in turn formed the basis of the covenant faith" (Craigie, 205-6).

Shepherd is also applied to Israel's leaders (Ezek 34:2)

- Heb 13:10
- 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4
- Rev 7:15-17

# Verse 1

David makes the metaphor personal

A psalm by David

Yahweh

Harkens back to God's shepherding provision in Israel's history

Deut 2:7 – “you have not lacked a thing”

The distinctiveness in the opening words of this psalm lies in the use of the pronoun, *my* shepherd; the shepherd theme, traditionally interpreted communally of the “flock” (or nation), is here given its most personal interpretation in the entire biblical tradition” (Craigie, 206)

I do not lack

“Lack” = to decrease, be devoid

- talking about needs, not desires
- compare “want” in KJV, NKJ, NAS, NAU, ESV, NRS, NIV

Expounds the thrust of the shepherd metaphor

What do sheep need?

- rest (v. 2)
- life (v. 3)
- guidance (vv. 2-3)
- safety/security (v. 4)

Present tense by context

- compare future tense “shall not” in KJV, NKJ, NAS, NAU, ESV, NIV

# Verse 2

As shepherd, Yahweh guides his sheep and provides for them what they need, starting with food and rest

In pastures of grass

He causes me to lie down

By waters of rest

He guides me

“Since the line is based on the beginning figure...the psalmist is saying that the LORD meets his spiritual needs--and in the process gives him the very best. As grass would be food for the sheep, the word of the LORD would be provision for the ‘hungry’ spirit. This ‘feeding’ could come through personal meditation, but it would regularly be done through the ministry of the priests, the ‘under-shepherds,’ who were to teach people the word of the LORD (see Mal. 2:1-9). The LORD would provide the psalmist with spiritual food at any time, anywhere; but it would be a regular provision in the sanctuary” (Ross, 561).

“pastures of grass” = “grassy pastures”  
- describes lush fields filled with good food  
- Underscores God’s bountiful provision

cf. “holy pastures” in Exod 15:13  
- links God’s provision to Exodus event

# Verse 2

As shepherd, Yahweh guides his sheep and provides for them what they need, starting with food and rest

Once again, the term “guides” also appears in Exod 15:13, linking the psalm back to the Exodus event

He causes me to lie down

By waters of rest

He guides me

The verb is causative

- God doesn't simply guide his sheep to food and rest
- Sometimes sheep must be shown what to do—they must be forced to lie down

“waters of rest” = “calm waters”

- term used of resting place of ark in wilderness (Num 10:33)

“The sheep are not taken to a rushing stream, but to still, calm lagoons. Flocks in the ancient Near East were watered at least once a day, usually around noon; but this leading was not limited to finding water to drink. It included finding a place for cleansing and refreshment. Here the placid waters could wash the wounds and cleanse the soiled spots” (Ross, 562).

# Verse 2

As shepherd, Yahweh guides his sheep and provides for them what they need, starting with food and rest

In pastures of grass

By waters of rest

He causes me to lie down

He guides me

Note the parallelism

- emphasis is placed on the two prepositional phrases initiating each clause
- The lush pastures and still waters are the focus
- In both cases, God's shepherding guidance is the underlying thought

# Verse 3

"my soul" = "me"

My soul

He restores

Hebrew term = *shub*

- can refer to spiritual repentance and restoration
- can also refer to physical refreshment or reviving

Sheep need renewal and restoration:

- scattered by bad shepherds (Ezek 34)
- wayward looking for food elsewhere
- frightened and scattered by storms or danger
- cf. Parable of lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7)

"It therefore bears the idea of returning something to its original state. David's words are general enough to mean that the LORD restores him to his proper spiritual and physical condition by forgiving him and renewing him (see Pss. 32 and 51)" (Ross, 562)

"It may picture the straying sheep brought back, as in Isaiah 49:5, or perhaps Psalm 60:1 (Heb 3), which uses the same verb, whose intransitive sense is often 'repent' or 'be converted' (e.g., Hos 14:1f; Joel 2:21). Psalm 19:7, by its subject (the law) and by the parallel verb ('making wise'), points to a spiritual renewal of this kind, rather than mere refreshment....

**In our context, the two senses evidently interact, so that the retrieving or reviving of the sheep pictures the deeper renewal of the man of God, spiritually perverse or ailing as he may be"** (Kidner, 127-8)

# Verse 3

continues theme of God's shepherding guidance from v. 2

My soul

He restores

Term "leads" used in Exod 15:13 ("You have **led** in your loyal love the people whom you have redeemed")

He leads me

not "the paths" as in KJV, NKJ, NAS, NAU  
- it is not so specific  
- means "right path"

in paths of righteousness

"There is a double meaning to the expression. The point is that God never leads in an unrighteous way; he always leads in the righteous way, which is the way home" (Ross, 564)

for the sake of His name

How does God direct his sheep in the right path?  
cf. Ps 119:105 – "light to my path"

# Verse 3

“name” = reputation  
- Yahweh’s reputation is the  
reason for his tender guidance

My soul

He restores

“In the ancient world a shepherd’s reputation depended on his direction. If he led his flock in the wrong direction, he would gain a bad reputation” (Ross, 564)

He leads

“Note the progression of ideas for the spiritual meaning: the psalmist receives the teaching of the LORD, and this teaching leads to spiritual renewal, and the spiritual renewal ensures that he will follow in the LORD in righteousness” (Ross, 564)

“for his sake,” also  
is indicated  
in the

context of the deliverance from Egypt” (Craigie, 207)

for the sake of His name

“the undertones of the Exodus indicates that his expectation is established on the bedrock of Israel’s faith, namely the precedent of God’s refreshment and guidance in the Exodus and wilderness journeys” (Craigie, 207)

# Verse 4

“indeed”

- could be emphatic (“indeed though”)
- could be concessive (“even though”)

Indeed though

I walk

Links back to the shepherding guidance in v. 3... “even though God guides me into a dark valley...”

in a valley of deep darkness

Phrase is difficult to interpret

- popular folk etymology understands it as “shadow of death”
- Traditionally associated specifically with death

“may very well be a compound noun meaning ‘the deepest darkness’ and describes life-threatening situations in precarious terrain where the flock would be exposed to attack” Davidson, *Vitality of Worship*, 84)

Phrase occurs 18x in OT

- 4x in Psalms
- 4x in Prophets
- 10x in Job

**Note that all occurrences are poetic—no narrative**

“The hill country of Judah is broken up by narrow and precipitous ravines, or wadis, difficult to descend and ascend, dark, gloomy, and abounding in caves, the abode of wild beasts and robbers” (Briggs, 209)

Ve

"It is important to note that 'the valley of the shadow of death' is as much God's right path for us as the 'green pastures' which lie beside 'quiet waters.' That is, the Christian life is not always tranquil nor, as we say, a mountain-top experience. God gives us valleys also. It is in the valleys with their trials and dangers that we develop character" (Boice, 1:211)

Ind

in a valley of deep darkness

I do not fear danger

"The dark valley, or ravine, is as truly one of his 'right paths' as are the green pastures--a fact that takes much of the sting out of any ordeal" (Kidner, 128).

for you are with me

Your rod and Your staff

**they** comfort me

# Verse 4

In David is confident because he trusts that God is guiding him and that even in this place, he is on the right path

cf. "danger" with traditional "evil" (KJV, NKJ, NAS, NAU, ESV, NRS, NIV)

His confidence comes from his knowledge of God's continual presence

Valley of deep darkness

I do not fear danger

"We are never so conscious of the presence of God as when we pass through life's valleys" (Boice, 1:211)

for You are with me

We have a similar promise in the NT:

"I will be with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mat 28:20)

God's presence a continual theme in OT:

- Gen 28:15 – "I will be with you" (Jacob)
- Exod 3:12 – "I will be with you" (Moses)
- Isaiah 7:14 – "God is with us"
- Deut 2:7 – "These forty years Yahweh your God has been with you; you have not lacked a thing"

# Verse 4

Note the shift from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> person

"*Thou*, at this point of danger, replaces the more distant 'He', in a person-to-person address; for the Shepherd is no longer ahead, to lead, but alongside to escort. In times of need, companionship is good, and he is armed" (Kidner, 129)

Palestinian shepherds usually carried two items:

- a rod for defense against wild beasts
- a staff to guide and control sheep

I do not fear danger

for **You** are with me

Your rod and Your staff

**they** comfort me

This pronoun is grammatically unnecessary

- its appearance gives it greater emphasis
- this further underscores David's confidence

# Verse 5

Metaphor shifts from shepherd to host

You arrange a table

However, the emphasis of divine provision and protection continues

be in Sitting down to eat and drink in the midst of danger from enemies is a marvelous picture of safety and security. David is saying that God provides food and safety for his people" (Ross, 567)

of a generous host who lavishes on a honored guest

You anoint my head

Probably not a reference to specific enemies

Another possible link back to the Exodus:

Ps 78:19 – rebels asks with contempt, "Can God really spread a table in the wilderness?"

"It more probably anticipates a victory celebration, where the enemies are present as captives; or an accession feast with defeated rivals as reluctant guests" (Kidner, 129)

# Verse 5

Not the anointing of a king, but of an guest's head was a common ANE custom before banquets

"In the ancient Near East oil was used to eliminate lice by 'smearing the hair with oil; this treatment prevented oxygen from penetrating the head and caused the lice to suffocate" (King and Stager, *Life in*

You arrange a table

before

in front

"The banquet was a celebration of God's provision and protection; the psalmist's experience of life (*viz.* his cup) had been so bountiful, that it was life itself which was full of blessing, overflowing with thanksgiving" (Craigie, 208)

parallel to the image

You anoint my head

of the "waters of rest" and "restores my soul" in vv. 2-3

with oil

My cup overflows

"In the banquet hall the cup would be filled with choice wine, so David is saying that the LORD has filled his life with good things. In a way this line summarizes all that has gone before in this meditation on the provision from the LORD; but specifically it highlights the physical provision of the LORD in life" (Ross, 568)

# Verse 6

Final verse serves as a closing meditation on the psalm

Surely

goodness and loyal love

will pursue me

my whole life

α Emphatic particle that links back to vv. 1-5

in the house of Yahweh

“The experience of the past and the rejoicing of the present gave rise to the magnificent expression of confidence in the future in v. 6”

“The two words work well together. ‘Goodness’ or ‘good’ refers to that which promotes, protects, produces, and enhances life (s.v. Ps. 34:8). And ‘loyal love’ is the well-known covenant word that describes God’s faithful love to keep his covenant promises. No other term could more adequately summarize the provisions of the LORD enumerated in Psalm 23” (Ross, 568-9)

# Verse 6

Final verse serves as a closing meditation on the psalm

Surely goodness and loyal love

will pursue me

my whole life

cf. Romans 8:31-39 – nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus

This verb is more aggressive than the traditional “follow me”. It is not a happy accident

“In the Old Testament world, to eat and drink at someone’s table created a bond of mutual loyalty, and could be the culminating token of a covenant.... So to be God’s guest is to be more than an acquaintance, invited for a day. It is to live with him” (Kidner, 130)

Just as the people were pursued by the Egyptians, and David by his enemies, so the future under God’s shepherding guidance would be marked by being aggressively pursued by God’s goodness and loyal covenant love

# Verse 6

Final verse serves as a closing meditation on the psalm

Sure "dwell" = *shub*, "return" (cf. v. 3) *loyal love* will pursue me

lit. "all the days of my life"

my whole life

and I will dwell

lifelong

"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, for it was not only the Levites who considered the courts of the Lord their true home (as in Pss 42 and 84) but also, in heart and mind, David the man of affairs: cf. 27:4; 65:4" (Kidner, 130)

"The traditional Hebrew text reads, 'I shall return in the house of the LORD,' which may be a compressed way of saying, 'I shall come back again and again to be present in the house of the LORD' (Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship*, 85)

# Verse 6

Final verse serves as a closing meditation on the psalm

Surely goodness and

lit. "for length of days"

- traditionally = "forever"
- context = "my whole life"

me

my whole life

and I will dwell

lifelong

"house" doesn't refer to the temple but most likely the tabernacle of David's day

in the house of Yahweh

"With this confidence, the psalmist rejoices not only in the present moment of festivity and thanksgiving, but also anticipates future occasions when he would return and dwell again in the *house of the Lord...*, in order once again to give thanks" (Craigie, 208)