

GOD PROVIDES
Psalm 23

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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Grandkids related their grandfather was 86 years old when he took his first plane ride. The plane circled for a few minutes and, then, landed. “Well, Grandpa,” they asked, “how did you like your first plane ride?” Rather shakily, he answered, “Fine, but I never really put all my weight on the thing.”

The reality is, grandpa, when you take a flight in an airplane, all of your weight is resting and dependent upon the success of the airplane. Put plainly, when you’re 7,000 feet up in the sky, there is no hedging your bet – you are totally committed, willingly or not.

The same is true when you put your faith in God. The psalmist discovered that even during our most difficult of days, we can have confidence in God. Scholars of the Psalms call this a “Psalm of Confidence,” for in it David expresses his complete confidence in the God upon whom he has cast his weight. At the very heart of Psalm 23 is an expression of absolute assurance in the provision and protection of Yahweh – the one with whom, the only one with whom, the psalmist has cast his future.

Maybe you’ve never noticed, but it is interesting that Psalm 23 is written in a sandwich form. The first section, verses 1-3, refers to God in the third person. “The Lord is my shepherd...He makes... He leads... He restores ...He guides.” At the center of the psalm (vs 4-5), however, the psalmist switches to the second person to address God. “You are with me...Your rod and Your staff...You prepare a table...You anoint my head...” And then, finally, in the very last verse – the concluding expression of confidence – he turns back to the third person. “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Let’s hear the rhythm of this song of the psalter.

I. First of all, David says the shepherd provides (v. 1-2).

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters.”

The most dominant theme of these first two verses is that Yahweh, the Lord, is our shepherd. This is very consistent with the claims elsewhere that, likewise, Yahweh is king. As shepherds, kings of old understood their responsibility to provide protective order for the people who rested under their rule and reign. In Jeremiah 23:4, speaking of the kings it says, “I will set up shepherds over

them and they will tend them, and they shall fear no more nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking.”

To be sure, this isn't the only place where God is depicted as shepherd. In Psalm 81, God is addressed: “Give ear, O shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock.”

And remember, our writer, David, himself was a shepherd – the boy shepherd of 1 Samuel who was out keeping the flock when a king was to be chosen from among the sons of Jesse.

When the psalmist declares, “I shall not be in want,” it doesn't mean that he will get each and every desire of his heart, but, rather, he will not be lacking something needed. You might say it this way: So long as the Lord is my shepherd, I shall suffer no lack.

Yes, David begins his psalm by recalling the provisions of God for His people. Think back to the Exodus, event when it says in Deuteronomy 2:7, “You have not lacked a thing.” Throughout this song, an undertone of the Exodus, the most important event of the Old Testament, plays softly in the background.

Notice also how personal the verses are to David. “The Lord is *my* shepherd.” Most often I point out the community connections in scripture – it's “we,” it's “us,” not “I” or “me.” But in this case, it is “my,” it is the first person. To be sure, the God of scripture is first and foremost the God of a people – ancient Israel. Faith in Him, however, is not merely tribal or corporate. It is also personal. God is a God known by His individual relationships. Does He have one with you? Can you declare with David, “The Lord is MY shepherd?”

He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When David, the shepherd boy, was anointed king by Samuel, God spoke to the prophet and said, “Arise and anoint him, for this is the one.” Then we're told, “The Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward” (1 Samuel 16:12-13). David belongs to Yahweh and Yahweh to David.

The psalm proclaims the intimacy of David's relationship with the Lord. Indeed, to David He is “my” shepherd. And, as long as He is David's shepherd, David will have rest on the Lord's provisions.

Those who have visited the city of David know that, indeed, a lush pasture is a rarity. The land is dry, arid, and rocky, with rolling hills, and sparse, tough grass. Water sources are few and seasonal. The shepherds spend their time moving flocks from one pasture to the next, looking for water and nourishment. Grass and water – the source of life for sheep.

II. The shepherd points us to the right path (v. 3)

“He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.”

“Paths of righteousness” means God, the good shepherd, points His sheep to the right path, guiding them to where they need to go. The sheep are not left to their own devices; they are led by God Himself on the providential path.

“For His name’s sake.” The shepherd, God, acts in ways that reveal and confirm His character and His nature. Knowing God’s name was a gift that Israel received when Moses stood and asked, “Who are you?” and God said, “I am Yahweh, I Am who I am.” Knowing the Almighty’s name, Israel had unprecedented knowledge of His nature and access to Him. Yes, the shepherd acts not only to benefit the sheep, but in a way that is consistent with the nature of the name He reveals.

There is a third thing I want you to see.

III. The shepherd protects (v. 4).

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

I’ve walked in that same valley, and you have, too – the valley where you need confidence in the God whom you serve. If we were going to translate the Hebrew literally, it says something like this: “Yea though I walk through ‘a very deep shadow....’” Some scholars would even translate it “total darkness.” The expression is deliberately used to convey the threat of death itself, the worst that evil can do. Similar language is used in Job 10:21-22, “Before I go to the place of no return, to the land of deepest night, of utter darkness and disorder, where even the light is like darkness.” After calamity upon calamity, Job tells God, “You sent me to the deepest, darkest shadows.”

Job knew the way, David knew the way, and you do, too.

Writer Kenneth Wilson tells of growing up in Pittsburgh. He writes, **“That house in which we lived on the side of one of Pittsburgh’s hills was three stories high. The bottom layer was the cellar and the top was what we called the third floor, really a finished attic, the ceiling of which was cut into shadowed geometric shapes by dormer windows. Up there were two bedrooms, a hallway, and a mysterious storage room for trunks that always smelled of mothballs and history. Our family slept up there, because the second floor was usually rented out for a tenant to help pay the rent.”**

What was unnerving for Kenneth was that, as the youngest, he had to go to bed first, braving [alone] that floor of dark bedrooms. “That bed in that room on the third floor seemed to be at the end of the earth, remote from any human habitation, close to unexplained noises and dark secrets.

“At my urging, my father would try to stop the windows from rattling, wedging wooden matchsticks into the cracks. But they always rattled in spite of his [best] efforts. Sometimes he would read me a story, but inevitably the time would come when he would turn out the light and shut the door, and I would hear his steps on the stairs, growing fainter and fainter [as my father went away]. Then all would be quiet, except for the rattling windows and my cowering imagination.

“Once, I remember my father said, ‘Would you rather I leave the light on and go downstairs, or turn the light out and stay with you for a while?’” Kenneth says, “I chose presence with

darkness over absence with light. Isn't that what we really want most in our valleys – the assurance that Someone is there?" (Kenneth L. Wilson, *Have Faith Without Fear*, p. 54)
There is no valley, no matter how dark, we will have to face alone, for Thou art with us.

The flock moved from watering source to watering source, from patch of grass to patch of grass. At times, the flock of sheep had to pass through the deep, rugged wadis – the dry streambeds cut through the semi-desert hills by the seasonal torrents unleashed by winter rain. The canyon depths are swathed in dark shadows, as the rising cliff walls exclude the distant sun. The psalmist says, "Despite the darkest valley, the deepest shadow, I will fear no evil." You see, because he fears Yahweh, he need not fear anything or anyone else.

Life with the shepherd is secure. The shepherd has a rod and a staff to guide and protect. You see, when the Lord grants you His presence, He also grants you His power. The shepherd of old carried two tools of the trade – the rod to beat off external enemies, the beasts of prey, and the crook staff to snatch his sheep from harm's way, to tap the sheep gently, guiding them on a good path. The rod and the staff, they bring comfort to the sheep. And just like the sheep trust the shepherd, so the psalmist encourages the singer to trust the Lord.

James Limburg, professor of Old Testament emeritus at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, recalls going bicycling with his son shortly after he'd gotten a 10-speed bicycle. **"We took a ride on the bike path around our town. Just off the path was a drainage tunnel which ran under the interstate highway." Father and son decided to explore it. They parked their bikes and began to walk through the tunnel. It was made of concrete, wide enough for them to walk side-by-side, but not even tall enough for the dad to stand upright. They walked for a distance and the tunnel took a sharp turn and, suddenly, it became pitch dark. James Limburg remembers, "A [little] hand reached out and took mine. Neither of us said anything about it, but we continued, hand-in-hand, until we came to another turn and we could see light again. Then the little hand let go." (homileticonline.com)**

You see, our lives are like that. This psalm is for those times when the path of life takes a sharp turn and leads us through darkness, the deepest shadow. There is no hint in the text that we can avoid the dark valley by taking a detour around it. The path will have to be traveled. There is no debate there. But there is the promise we will never have to go through the darkness alone. Like a good shepherd who cares for the sheep, like a loving parent who holds the hand of a child, the Lord promises to be with us on the way through our darkness.

There is a fourth thing David says about Yahweh.

IV. Yahweh prepares (v. 5).

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

The metaphor takes something of a turn in verse 5. Yahweh is not so much a shepherd now, as He is a loving host. He sits us at His banqueting table. He anoints us with oil as a sign of celebration, and He fills our cup to overflowing.

In the New Testament, the banquet table is the sign of salvation. Jesus Himself promises to eat and to drink with His disciples in the kingdom of God (Matthew 26:29). He leads the banquet with them, the Lord's Supper through which they remember Him (1 Corinthians 11:24-26). And the Book of the Revelation promises that the church will gather at the marriage supper of the Lamb when Christ comes for His bride (Revelation 19:7, 9).

This anointing of oil relates to the gift of the Spirit. When Samuel took the oil to anoint David, our writer, as king of Israel, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him (1 Samuel 16:13). And a full cup is another sign of God's fullness and blessing. This party is a genuine celebration.

The psalmist closes with the best words ever: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (v. 6).

After the troubles of this life, there is eternal happiness in God's celestial abode.

I told you at the beginning of this sermon there is, softly playing in the background, the rhythm of the Exodus. As sheep are guided in their trek through the desert by the caring shepherd, so Israel was guided through the Exodus wanderings by Yahweh, who provided for their needs. In Psalm 78:19, it all comes together when Yahweh is described as "spreading a table in the desert" as He provided for the Exodus Israelites.

And as we glance backward at God's provision at His table in the desert with the Exodus, we then turn and look forward in this psalm to the eschatological feasting at God's table. And in-between the two, of course, we will have the Temple. This psalm anticipates God's dwelling with His people. Imagine years later, as travelers journeyed toward the Temple – the image of the providing shepherd and of His provisioning at the Exodus: God, the hope necessary to sustain them during their rough pilgrimage to Jerusalem to be where God Himself dwells.

In this closing verse, Yahweh is viewed as the opulent host who exercises liberal hospitality to His guests who are honored to have been chosen to live with God and were satisfied with the goodness in Yahweh's house. Psalm 27:4 says, "One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple." Dwelling with Yahweh affords the guest the opportunity to experience the beauty of God.

Actually, Psalms 23-30 have a combined theme of approaching and dwelling in the house of God. Rather than visiting sporadically on a pilgrimage during the Holy Days to be in Jerusalem, now the psalmist looks to a day when we can dwell eternally in the temple. The temple was to be the symbol of Yahweh's presence with Israel. It is here that God comes down in a special way to be with His people. To be present in the temple would mean to be with God, to have access to Him in lament and praise and thanksgiving. To forever dwell in the temple is to remain always in God's caring, effective presence. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." "Forever" is a really good word for God's people.

In John's Gospel, chapter 10, we learn of one more, final, shepherd, as Jesus describes His ministry, His essence, and His presence. "I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."

David had a caring shepherd in Yahweh. And we have a caring shepherd in His Christ – the shepherd who, when the enemy comes, goes to the cross to take our place, to die for our sins, that we can be free from the thief who only comes to kill, steal, and destroy (John 10:10).

Maybe you find yourself this morning walking in the darkest, deepest shadow. Maybe you, too, need to reach out your hand and take hold of the hand of God, so you, too, can fear no evil. Maybe you're here this morning and you need to acknowledge the fact that in His Christ, God became the sacrificial shepherd, dying on behalf of His sheep.

Tom Boogaart tells the story, **"As I was walking through Kollen Park in Holland, Michigan, along the shoreline of Lake Macatawa, I overtook a young mother and her two daughters. The younger daughter, maybe 4 years old, was forging ahead, and the older daughter, maybe 10 years old, was in conversation with her mother.**

"As I passed, I heard the mother say, 'Would you rather have one flower or 20 flowers?' I had no idea what in the conversation led to that question, but the older daughter answered, 'I'd rather have 20 flowers,' and she looked in my direction....

"Would this young woman, I wondered, ever hear a counter truth, someone who would tell her that one thing in life could be more than enough?...

"I started to ruminate on the theme of 'one thing' in Scripture. I thought of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler: "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich (Luke 18:22-23)." The rich young ruler had acquired many things in life, things that gave him standing in the community, both moral points for fulfilling the law and material wealth. But the many was the enemy of the one. With his many acquisitions, his heart was divided and distracted. He could not find the one, narrow path.

"I thought about the story in which Martha came to Jesus complaining about her sister Mary who was not helping her prepare for the upcoming meal. To this complaint the Lord answered: 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her' (Luke 10:41). Many things worry and distract us to the point that we, like Martha, can no longer see the one crucial thing standing right in front of us, the better part of life that can never be taken from us.

"In his response to both the rich young ruler and Martha, Jesus is reminding his followers of the Shema and applying its truth to everyday life. Moses implored the people of Israel: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)....

“So I want to say to that little girl walking with her mother and sister along the shore of Lake Macatawa: Do not listen to the peddlers of our culture; let not your heart be distracted by many things. There is a fullness that is emptiness, and an emptiness that is fullness. And empty heart has more space for God and, filled with the love of God, has more awareness of the world so loved by God and more courage to engage the forces that threaten to undo it.

“I want to say to that little girl that there is one flower more beautiful than 20 other flowers, one worthy of your full attention, a lily crowned with thorns.” (Tom Boogaart, “One Flower or Twenty Flowers,” *Reformed Journal*, August 20, 2022; <https://blog.reformedjournal.com/2022/08/20/one-flower-or-twenty-flowers/>)

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