

The Lord is my Shepherd (Psalm 23)

by Todd Atkinson

This sermon delves into Psalm 23, traditionally attributed to King David, emphasizing the profound care and provision God offers to His shepherds and leaders. It explores the concept of soul weariness and the internal restoration God provides, leading to a place of abundance and renewal. The psalm illustrates God's intimate care, guidance through times of unknowing, and eternal blessings for those who trust in Him.

Scripture: Psalm 23:1, Psalm 23:2, Psalm 23:4, Psalm 23:5

Topics: "God's Provision", "Restoration of the Soul"

Description

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Transcript

This morning, of course, authorship of this psalm is traditionally inscribed to David, the great ruler of Israel. Of course, this is one of the most well-known of the psalms. Its words regarding the valley of the shadow of death have brought comfort to literally millions.

However, I think we should take care not to think of this overly as a funeral psalm. It has so much more significance than that, and especially to us gathered here today. Psalm 23 begins with the words, The Lord is my shepherd.

Remember that it's King David writing these words, the one to whom God said, You shall be shepherd of my people Israel. David was the one called by God to be the shepherd king. Which meant that his calling was to lead God's people with the same care and attentiveness and protectiveness as a shepherd would lead his sheep.

Here in Psalm 23, this shepherd over the nation of Israel begins his worship by proclaiming, The Lord is my shepherd. I have a shepherd. Because shepherds need shepherding too.

Those whom God has called to care for his people equally need caring for. In fact, the God who has called you is not asking you to do anything for his sheep that he is not willing and wanting to do for your soul

also. Psalm 23 speaks to the many ways that God wants to care for his shepherds.

King David felt so supremely cared for by God as a shepherd, as a shepherd king, a shepherd ruler, that he could write, I shall not want. To want means to be in lack. To be without.

To be devoid of. When I was doing the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius, I was invited to spend a day contemplating this psalm. It was so timely for me that I couldn't move off this psalm for six weeks.

But there were things I felt the need to wrestle with, and at the time I couldn't say with David, I shall not want, or I am not in a place of want. And so I prayer journaled for days, because the truth is I was in lack. For days I brought before God every area of my life where I felt that I was in personal deficit.

And there were a lot. Ask Bishop Trevor. He was working, supporting me at that time.

And I asked the Lord who is my shepherd to bring me out of lack and into abundance so that I could say with David, I'm not in lack. I have enough of what I need. I am well provided for.

When we in North America think of God providing for us or of us not being in lack, we tend to think of this in financial terms. That is not primarily what this psalm has in mind. David is thinking more of the kind of lack or emptiness or exhaustion that we know uniquely as leaders.

This is him writing as a king. What we might call soul weariness. The weariness that results from having given out so much you feel like you have nothing left over.

That's why David continues by writing, he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.

He's not going to talk about external provision. He's talking about internal provision. The words he makes me are not intended to imply force.

God doesn't usually make us rest. The words he makes me means he makes it possible for me to rest, to lie down. To lie down is a posture of rest.

And to lie down in green pastures is to rest in abundance. In God's lushness. If you'd asked me four years ago, life felt anything but lush.

My soul was so wanting. He leads me beside still waters. Some translators put this, he leads me beside quiet waters.

We live lives that are much more characterized by busyness than quietness. I grew up in a home where people would turn very quiet when they were upset. Consequently, quietness for me felt more like a punishment than a provision.

It was an emotional cold shoulder. It was a withdrawing from. It has taken me years to see that with God, quietness is not emotional withdrawal or disapproval.

But quite the reverse, it is an invitation to intimacy. Stillness is one of God's love languages. Where at the time I would love to talk about how much God says by saying nothing.

In quietness. Still waters is the place that he ministers rest and renewal to us. The place that he ministers love and replenishment to us.

He restores my soul finally. The soul has been described as the seed of our personality. I like to think of the soul as the unrepeatable you.

It is where desire, emotion and passion have their home within us. Therefore, it's also the place where emotional pain, disappointment and discouragement live. Over the years, King David held many successful military campaigns, survived them all.

But he found that it was his soul, the part of him that no one could see, the part of him that didn't bleed, that suffered the worst of the blows. Think of Stephen David, how many battles he came out of. But on the inside, he knew he hurt.

I have known that many times. It wasn't the wars against the Philistines that left their deepest wounds. It was the personal conflicts.

It was the Saul's, the Absalom's and his own sin that cut him most deeply. So it is with us, it's our personal battles, the loss of an ally in ministry, a betrayal, the loss of a loved one, and many other things that affects our soul most deeply. But by the time David wrote this psalm, he learned that he could bring his beat-up soul into the presence of God.

Remember, this is a psalm. This is his worship. He could bring his soul in whatever state it was in, and he could bring it into the presence of God where God would love his soul, bind it up like a shepherd would his sheep.

He restores my soul. To restore means to return, to recover, to repair. Over these days, I pray that the Lord would repair your soul, the part where nobody else can see.

Your shepherd wants to bring you to a place where your soul feels intact and whole again, and glad, where your spiritual desires run again like a strong river, they course, where hope flourishes again, where love is made new again. If we had more time, we would continue through this psalm. Look for the many ways that God wishes to love his shepherds.

Twice in the psalm, the word lead, he leads his leaders. The only secret I got in terms of leadership is I want to be a good follower. If every day I am led by him, I seem to always have the wherewithal to lead.

But if I am not following him, if I'm not being led, I lose my way. He protects them in times of unknowing. The valley of the shadow of death is a precipitous ravine in the Hebrew.

Sharp walls. It's so dark that you can't see what you're entering into. There's unknowns and unknown dangers there.

And that's what his rod and staff bring comfort. Times of unknowing. How he hosts us at his table.

Sits you down and hosts you. Pours a cup for you to overflowing. How he blesses us all the days of our lives and into eternity.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us. Surely. Most certainly.

All the days of our lives. And when our labors have ended as shepherds, we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

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