

SINGING THE SHEPHERD SONG
PSALM 23

Where do you go or what do you do when you are uncomfortable — when you are discouraged, sad, hurting, uncertain about the future (or even today)? You could go to the internet for [some suggestions](#):

- ✓ Comforting Smells — Scents from lavender to rose, cinnamon to vanilla, delivered through plants, essential oils or a soothing stovetop simmer, signal your brain to relax and stay in the...moment.
- ✓ Childhood Objects — Turn to simple items like a blanket, stuffed animal or even an action figure. They might be hidden in a closet, but they soothed you in your younger years, they can do so now.
- ✓ Nature — It's permanent, yet ever-changing. Being in nature's presence can remind you that your life, like the oceans, mountains, and forests, can remain steady through a lot of change.
- ✓ Reliable Reads — Cozy up to books that you have read again and again. My go-to is my collection of *Cathy* comics that I discovered during my teen years and never fail to put things in perspective.
- ✓ Instrumental Music — It's music that won't invade your already-stressed mind with emotionally triggering lyrics, but will occupy your ears with soft, soothing sounds.
- ✓ Soothing Self-Talk — Positive self-talk can remind you what you already know—that you are loved, safe and strong enough to weather life's storms. It can also help you let go of any guilt or negativity...

It seems to me they forgot food — pancakes, ice cream, mac and cheese, a grilled cheese and tomato soup.

They also forgot the best place of comfort — God and His Word. You have uncomfortable situations and people in your life. For your comfort and steadfastness, I want to remind you of an old song to sing. You've sung it before. It's very familiar to you. In fact, it's probably the most well-known song in the world. Say the first four words of the song to an unbeliever, and they will almost certainly be able to give you the next five — “The Lord is my...Shepherd, I shall not want.”

For your comfort, we are going to look at the Shepherd song, Psalm 23, where we will be reminded...

IN OUR HARSH CIRCUMSTANCES, GOD IS A CONSTANT COMFORT — OUR ONLY COMFORT.

In **three vignettes**, we see God's character (and our fitting responses) in hard circumstances.

1. The Shepherd and His Sheep (vv. 1-4)

- ✓ The NATURE of the Shepherd
- ✓ The PROVISION of the Shepherd
- ✓ The LEADERSHIP of the Shepherd
- ✓ The DECLARATION of the Sheep: “I shall not want”
- ✓ The DECLARATION of the sheep: “I fear no evil”

2. The Host and His Guests (v. 5)

- ✓ The PROVISION of the Host
- ✓ The DECLARATION of the sheep: “My cup overflows”

3. God and His People (v. 6)

- ✓ The PROVISION of God
- ✓ The DECLARATION of the sheep: “I will dwell in the house of LORD”

1. The Shepherd and His Sheep (vv. 1-4)

- The setting of the psalm —
 - ✓ The ascription says that it is a psalm of David; given the theme of shepherd-king, that fits well.
 - ✓ We know nothing of the setting; some have suggested it was when he was in the wilderness fleeing from Absalom and his rebellion (and a parallel to Ps. 3). Certainly possible, but we don't know.
 - ✓ The anonymity of the circumstances are helpful for us — it can be applied to many situations; it has universal appeal (even unbelievers are drawn to it).
 - ✓ What does seem clear is that this is not a song written in David's youth; it is the mature reflection of an older man who has gone through trials and hardships — he has learned to be confident in God.
- The **NATURE** of the Shepherd (v. 1)
 - ✓ He is **the LORD** — YHWH is the Shepherd.
 - He is the covenant God of Israel — the one who made His promise to Abram and then to David (2 Sam. 7:16) fulfills His promise as a humble shepherd.
 - This is not a song about a generic God; it is about the Supreme God of all (Gen. 2:4; 12:1).
 - The psalm begins and ends with this declaration (vv. 1, 6), making it an essential theme.
 - ✓ He is **my Shepherd**.
 - **Shepherds** were responsible for the perpetual care of sheep — like the parent of a toddler, the basic task was just to keep the sheep alive (because sheep are not smart or strong; 1 Ki. 22:17).
 - The imagery of a shepherd was commonly used for kings (2 Sam. 5:2; Ezk. 37:24).
 - And the Shepherd image is also used elsewhere of YHWH (Ps. 28:9; 80:1; 95:7).
 - There is also irony in this statement — shepherds were not well-regarded in those days. Their job was humble because of the hours (24-7), the environment (outside in all weather), and the duties which left them dirty and with a certain odor. They were humble. And the King of Heaven, YHWH is willing to be humble in His care of His people. Though He really is great and we really are humble, yet He stoops to care for and endure with us.
 - Scripture uses many other analogies to indicate God's nature: He is King (distant relationship), Deliverer, Rock, Shield, and Fortress. But when David wants to denote the comfort God gives, he identifies Him as the Shepherd. He knows His sheep and personally cares for them...
 - ✓ He is **my Shepherd**. David, the king of Israel identifies himself as a dependent sheep and claims God as His King. There is personal relationship and intimacy with God the Shepherd. While this is David's song, it is a song that would be sung by each worshipper and is still sung by all worshippers. God is personally available to those who are dependent on Him (Mt. 6:6; 7:7; Heb. 4:16).
 - ✓ When you feel alone, if you belong to God, you are not alone. You have a personal shepherd to care.

• The **PROVISION** of the Shepherd (vv. 2-4) — what does the Shepherd do for His sheep?

✓ **He makes me lie down in green pastures** (v. 2)

- Typically shepherds would move sheep **from pasture to pasture** to find something green for them to eat. Both the pasture and the greenness would only last for a season and then they would have to move elsewhere. The shepherd was always looking for more food.
- W.M. Thompson was a 19th-century missionary who observed shepherds in Israel in a snowy winter — they were in the trees all day, cutting down branches, so that the sheep could feed on the green leaves and tender twigs.
- YHWH provides for His sheep, giving them what they need to eat. God's care for His sheep isn't seasonal or fleeting; it is constant and permanent. And it's sufficient — He doesn't give food from one pasture; He has many **pastures** (pl.) at His disposal. Food is plentiful. He is adequate.
- Other shepherds would take what belonged to the sheep and feed themselves (Ezk. 34:2).
- But the LORD feeds His sheep and nourishes them — and we understand that this is spiritual provision — God feeds His people on His Word (which reveals Him). “What do I need to know about Him?”
- Just as grass was satisfying food for the sheep, God's Word is sufficient food for His people.

✓ **He restores my soul** (v. 3) —

- The word **restore** is commonly translated “return” or “repent.” It takes one back to a point of origin — a withered hand is healed (1 Kings 13:6); captives are returned to the land (Is. 52:8); walls are rebuilt (Is. 58:12). It pictures a shepherd **carrying a lamb** back to the flock.
- The word is also often used of spiritual return and repentance. Can you think of a time when David needed spiritual restoration? Pss. 32 & 51 (Bathsheba).
- David endured many difficult circumstances, beginning with Saul attempting to kill him because David had been anointed as the next king (and David hadn't even sought the position). But the most grievous trial was his adulterous and murderous sin with Bathsheba.
- He suffered both physically and spiritually (**Ps. 32:3-5a**) — and God restored him (**vv. 5b, 1-2**).
- Your trials may be the roadway to God's restoration for your life. He is not seeking your destruction; He desires to bring you home.
- If you have some unconfessed sin, hear in this psalm that He seeks to forgive and restore.
- But you must repent — acknowledge your guilt, and ask for forgiveness and transformation.
- If you are not a believer, you also need to repent — and God's grace of restoration is the same.

✓ He uses His **rod and staff [to] comfort me** (v. 4)

- The shepherd has two primary tools to protect the sheep from danger — a **rod** was used to strike attacking animals like wolves, while a **staff** was designed to pull sheep out of precarious places and to gently lead them on the right pathway.
- Our temptation is to think that hard circumstances are meant to destroy us. They are not.
- Hard circumstances are designed to transform us. God is protecting. We should be comforted.

- The first question in the Heidelberg Catechism is, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” How would you answer that? David’s comfort (as the king of Israel) is that God is leading him — and God is leading him to restful places. The wolves may still be in the background (troubles may still exist), but his comfort is that God is guarding.
- A few years ago Raye Jeanne took our dog on a short walk in our neighborhood; a dog got out of its house, attacked our dog and inflicted \$200-300 of damage. Since then, I bought her dog mace and she got a golf club; “she never leaves home without them.” She and the dog are safe.
- When you live in this world, when God is your Shepherd, you are safe (Ps. 91:1, 5-10). (You might even remind yourself by repeating those words: “no evil will befall me...”)
- ✓ What does God do for His people? He nurtures (feeds), restores, and protects. And He leads...

- The **LEADERSHIP of the Shepherd** (vv. 2-3) — where will the Lord take His people?

- ✓ Two times in these verses, it says that YHWH leads His sheep — **He leads** (v. 2); **He guides** (v. 3)
- ✓ **He leads me beside quiet waters** (v. 2) —
 - The shepherd needed to lead the sheep because they didn’t know where to go and they had no ability to protect themselves on their travels from pasture to pasture.
 - The word **lead** means to escort with care — commonly used of God (Ex. 15:13; Is. 40:11; 49:10).
 - And **He leads to quiet waters**; that doesn’t mean that Israel’s shepherds led to turbulent, rushing water; shepherds often watered their sheep at wells.
 - But it does mean that they are taken to a place where they can drink at peace — without being rushed and without being worried. The **water** is still and refreshing; God’s pools are **restful**.
 - God designed the weekly schedule of life to include rest for the Israelite (Sabbath); He has provided Himself as the ultimate place of rest for the believer (Ps. 62:7; 116:7; Mt. 11:29).
 - We expect to find comfort in possessions, power, position, (our own) providence; but our comfort is that God is sovereignly directing and leading us and everywhere He takes us is restful.
 - Years ago I went to visit a visitor to the church. I got the address, made the arrangements, and left at the appropriate time. And somewhere in the large development I got turned around. And I spent an hour looking for the house. Because Google Maps didn’t exist and I didn’t have a cell phone I could only do one thing when I arrived — plead ignorance. I knew the destination address but I had no idea how to get there. God knows. Whatever your situation, He is leading you to a place where you will find restfulness in Him.
- ✓ **He guides me in the paths of righteousness** (v. 3)
 - This guidance might cause the readers to think about God leading in the wilderness (Ex. 13:17).
 - Where God leads is in His **paths** — this refers to well-worn wagon tracks and trail.
 - To lead sheep in “righteous” paths meant going the right way to lead them to something beneficial. The direction he takes them will be for their good. They won’t be led astray.
 - The right paths are contrasted with the crooked paths that destroy (Prov. 2:9, 12, 15, 18).

- David means that God is sovereignly leading him in places that are right and beneficial. If he follows YHWH the Shepherd, he will be led on the right path (which will also be righteous path).
- God never leads us to evil (sin, Js. 1:13) and He never leads us to what will harm us (which doesn't mean that he always leads us on easy pathways). Whatever He brings is good.
- If you obey the Lord on your pathway, it will produce righteousness and it will benefit you.
- He is *your* Shepherd. Whatever hardness is on your trail, He is using to strengthen you and take you home; He will never do wrong or evil to you.
- ✓ **And why does** He lead and guide me? For ***His name's sake*** (v. 3b).
 - He loves and provides for and protects His people so that ***His name*** (character) will be revealed.
 - The significance of all that God does for His people extends beyond the personal benefit His people receive; He has other eternal purposes in mind in His work.
 - He wants the world to know just how great He is (so they will also go to Him).
 - When He keeps promises to Israel (and to you and me), He demonstrates to others that He is loyal and can be trusted (25:11; 31:3-4). And it leads *us* to worship Him (79:9-13).
- God reveals His nature, provision, and leadership of His people in these verses. And David responds — and teaches us how we should respond to God's care and nurture.

- **The DECLARATION of the Sheep: "I shall not want" (v. 1)**

- ✓ David knows what it is like to be a shepherd. He knows what shepherds do and what their motive is. And even the simple statement ***The LORD is my Shepherd*** provokes him to say, ***I shall not want***.
- ✓ Because God is the Shepherd providing and leading he will not be devoid of what he needs. He won't be empty. He won't be destitute. He will always have all his needs supplied (v. 2).
- ✓ There is a hint at God's provision in the wilderness wandering — Moses told Israel, "You have not lacked anything" (Dt. 2:7). It echoes what they sang on the eastern side of the Red Sea (Ex. 15:13ff).
- ✓ Sheep are entirely helpless to provide for and protect themselves. But with the shepherd they are safe. So David (the king!) and the OT and NT believer alike are all safe in God's care.
- ✓ The oak trees have leaves, the blue bonnets have purple petals, the squirrels have nuts, the bees have nectar, and the hummers have sugar water (Mt. 6:28ff). If God cares enough to provide for all those, He will provide what David and you and I need. We will not lack (esp. spiritually).

- **The DECLARATION of the sheep: "I fear no evil" (v. 4)**

- ✓ At the beginning of the section on the Shepherd there is a declaration of trust; and in the last verse there is another declaration of trust — ***I fear no evil***.
- ✓ While that is a significant statement, notice the context in which David says it: ***Even though...***
- ✓ Even when life takes him down into a valley, he will not fear.
- ✓ The phrase ***valley of the shadow of death*** is much broader than it sounds; it's a **valley of darkness**. It is dark because the sun cannot reach into the valley and there are dangers in terrain and enemies.

- ✓ It refers to all the bitter and harsh events of life. It's any dark day. It might be a day of death, but it might also be a day of such deep pain and suffering that death would seem to be welcome relief.
- ✓ David [*the king!*] had that in his life — political enemies, broken family relationships, sexual sin (his own and others), unwise and ungodly decisions, death of children, and the suffering of war.
- ✓ And in those days, he says, ***I fear no evil***. And like the valley of darkness, ***evil*** is not just “evil” but anything that is injurious, “bad,” and hard. “I will not be afraid of anything that can or might happen in darkness.” The temptation to fear is certainly present. But he refuses to be fearful. Why?
- ✓ ***Because You are with me***. YHWH is present. The God who promised loyal love is beside Him. The Shepherd whose job it is to care for Him is there; the Shepherd whose reputation is at stake is with Him. And in His presence, He is also acting for His sheep (with ***His rod and staff***).
- ✓ And notice that with this line, David changes from talking in the third person (“he”) to the second person (“You”). YHWH is not a vague reality but a present and active personal friend and guide.
- ✓ The presence of God is often depicted as a comfort for God’s people (e.g., Gen. 26:24; Josh. 1:5, 9; Mt. 1:21; Heb. 13:5). Now, in his distress “the Shepherd is no longer ahead, to lead, but alongside to escort. In times of need, companionship is good; and he is armed.” [Kidner]
- ✓ Robert Murray M’Cheyne said of our fears, “If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me.”
- ✓ Do not be fearful. Christ is praying for you and God is with you. Always.

2. The Host and His Guests (v. 5)

- There is a second picture of God’s comfort of His people in Ps. 23 — it is of a host (King?) and guests.
- The **PROVISION** of the Host
 - ✓ Like the shepherd providing food and water for the sheep, the host provides a meal for the guests.
 - ✓ But it’s not basic sustenance. He is providing a lavish banquet ***table***. It’s a feast. He has laid out the food and drink and the table is overflowing with food.
 - ✓ The host is fulfilling all His duties — ***You have anointed my head...*** It’s akin to washing the feet of a guest when they arrive; he is providing refreshment; it’s invigorating (like hot towel on an international flight to wash your face). He is being hospitable — and lavish in the provision.
 - ✓ And there is intimate fellowship — David is still saying of YHWH, “You...”
 - ✓ And the meal is done ***in the presence of my enemies***. David is safely in the host’s home and the enemies are on the outside looking in, and they are incapable of harming him. (Perhaps David is thinking of his friends who provided a feast for him while fleeing Absalom, **2 Sam. 17:27-19**).
 - ✓ David’s point is that God has provided; he is refreshed and safe (e.g., **Ps. 4:8; 12:5; Prov. 18:10**).
 - ✓ This picture also tells us that God is not only a “humble” Shepherd who cares for His sheep, but He is a rich and powerful King that has the resources to provide for His guests. *He* is not deficient...

- The **DECLARATION** of the sheep: “My cup overflows”

- ✓ The picture is simple — he put out a goblet for a drink and God overfilled it (Jn. 1:16).
- ✓ Just like the pastures for the sheep are ever-green and the water restful, this provision is abundant.
- ✓ God has filled David’s life with good things. The lines have fallen to him in pleasant places (16:6).
- ✓ David is not content because his circumstances have changed or eased; he is content because he has taken the time to evaluate his condition and count the good things God has provided for him.
- ✓ And he has realized he not only is not destitute (not lacking, v. 1), but he is overflowing with good.
- ✓ Do you count the goodnesses of God in your life? When it’s hard?
- ✓ There’s an old Peanuts cartoon in which Linus has crumpled up a thank you note; when Lucy asks him what’s wrong, he says in exasperation, “I hate writing ‘thank you’ letters for toys that I’ve already broken!” We struggle with gratitude when we think life is broken; David’s model is that we see life isn’t broken if we intentionally count the goodnesses of God and thank Him.
- ✓ (You might consider cultivating some form of a thank list to help stimulate your contentedness.)

3. God and His People (v. 6)

- Having given two pictures of the character of God, David now simply explains the reality...

- The **PROVISION** of God

- ✓ From God’s hand, ***surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me...***
 - God provides ***goodness and lovingkindness*** — we might give it the sense, “good lovingkindness,” or “good grace.” God gives what is good and gracious out of His loyal love for His covenant people (the next line again uses **LORD** [YHWH] to indicate that loyalty).
 - And it will ***follow*** — not just kind of wander behind, but seek and pursue. God’s gracious love is in “hunting you down” mode. It’s a perpetual “bank error in your favor, collect \$200” mode.
 - And it is certain that will happen. Actually, the word ***surely*** has two nuances; it can mean “confidence” (like here), or it can mean something restricted or singular — “only.” I think that’s the better way to understand it — because David is in covenant relationship with God, He will ***only*** give Him what is good and gracious. God is never against Him; His gifts are always for Him.
- ✓ Like Job and Job’s friends, in some circumstances we are tempted to think that God is against us. He is not. He cannot be against us. He can only be for us. And He is relentless in His pursuit to provide.
- ✓ And this will happen through ***all the days of David’s life*** (into eternity). It’s God’s never-ending grace.
- ✓ How did David respond to this gift?

- The **DECLARATION** of the sheep: “I will dwell in the house of Lord”

- ✓ When he says ***I will dwell***, it is the same word as “restore” (v. 3) — “I will return.”
- ✓ He is returning to ***the house of the Lord*** — the tabernacle; the place of worship and fellowship.
- ✓ David simply means God has pursued him and brought Him back into fellowship and there David will remain ***forever*** — both now and into eternity, he enjoys the company of His Shepherd-King.

CONCLUSION: The atheist poet and philosopher of the French Enlightenment, **Voltaire**, was asked by a fellow atheist on one occasion if he could speak some words of comfort to a dying friend. **His response** was, “I don’t think I can do that. The thought that there might really be a hell plagues me continually.”

For Voltaire, there was no possibility for comfort. For us as followers of God, there is a great word of comfort — it is to sing a song. More specifically, it is to **sing the shepherd song**. We cannot change our circumstances. There will be hardships in our lives, that like helpless sheep, will be beyond our capacity to resolve. But we have a great Shepherd who has been given to us so that we will learn to rely and trust in the One who will always lead His sheep with love and wisdom.

BENEDICTION: Psalm 91:1-4 (David L.)