

The twenty-third Psalm is a fitting place to begin our mini-series on the Psalms. With its famous imagery of the shepherd it has frequently been connected with Jesus’ teaching on the “good shepherd” in John’s gospel. But have you ever noticed that the imagery shifts halfway through the Psalm?

In verses 1-4 the imagery is all oriented around the pastoral theme of the Shepherd. But in verse 5 everything switches over to the royal banquet.

What is going on?

If we are a flock of sheep being led by a good shepherd,
then why are we sitting at a table?

Why would a shepherd anoint his sheep’s head with oil?
And how can a sheep drink out of a cup?

If we would understand what is going on in Psalm 23,
then we need to follow the shepherd theme throughout the scriptures.

1. The Shepherd Leads Me (v1-4)

23:1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Sunday mornings we have been going through Genesis –
and we have seen the shepherd theme several times:

- 1) Abel was a shepherd who cared for the flocks
- 2) Jacob met Rachel as she was shepherding her father’s flocks
- 3) And especially, in Genesis 46-47 Joseph’s brothers identify themselves as shepherds when speaking with Pharaoh.

In other words, the Israelites are shepherds.
God’s people are shepherds.

Why is that important?

As we’ll see in the coming weeks,
Jacob refers to God as the Shepherd who has led him through all his life,
and in his blessing of Joseph he again speaks of the Shepherd of Israel.

So already at the beginning of the Bible the shepherd theme connects the shepherd leaders
with the Shepherd God.

In the Exodus God led his people like a flock out of Egypt –
and in Numbers 14 we hear that the children of Israel were “shepherds” in the wilderness
for forty years.

In Numbers 27 when Moses is about to die, he asks God to provide a leader
“who shall go out before them and come in before them,
who shall lead them out and bring them in,
that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.”

And so by the end of the Pentateuch we already have all the raw material:
God is the shepherd of Israel –
and God appoints men to shepherd his flock.

And of course, all this comes together in the shepherd-king, David.
He is identified as a shepherd when he is introduced in 1 Samuel 16.
He uses his shepherd’s skills to defeat Goliath in 1 Samuel 17.
And in 2 Samuel 5 all the tribes of Israel declare that God himself had said to David,
“You shall be shepherd of my people Israel.”

In 1 Kings 22 the prophet Micaiah speaks of the death of Ahab
as the scattering of the people of Israel, “as sheep that have no shepherd.”

Several Psalms use the shepherd theme:
Psalm 28 calls on the LORD to “be the shepherd” of Israel “and carry them forever,”
and Psalm 80 speaks of God as the Shepherd of Israel
but Psalm 78 speaks of how God called David to Shepherd Israel.

This juxtaposition of God as shepherd and the Davidic king as shepherd is important.

Jeremiah frequently speaks of the “shepherds” – namely, the rulers of the people,
contrasting the shepherds who rebelled
with the “shepherds after my own heart” (Jeremiah 3:15)
clearly reminding us of David.

Listen to how Jeremiah says this in Jeremiah 23:

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord.

2 Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel,

concerning the shepherds who care for my people:

*“You have scattered my flock and have driven them away,
and you have not attended to them.*

Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord.

*3 Then I will gather the remnant of my flock
out of all the countries where I have driven them,
and I will bring them back to their fold,
and they shall be fruitful and multiply.*

*4 I will set shepherds over them who will care for them,
and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed,
neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord.*

5 “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord,

*when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,
and he shall reign as king and deal wisely,
and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*

6 In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely.

And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

*7 "Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer say,
'As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,'*

*8 but 'As the Lord lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel
out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.'
Then they shall dwell in their own land."*

So in Jeremiah 23, the promise of the new shepherds
is closely connected with the restoration of the Davidic king –
the one who was promised to David.

Likewise, Ezekiel 34 speaks of the shepherds of Israel and their failure to care for the flock.

God condemns the shepherds for their treatment of the flock,
and then concludes with his promise:

11 "For thus says the Lord God:

Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.

12 As a shepherd seeks out his flock

when he is among his sheep that have been scattered,

so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them

*from all places where they have been scattered
on a day of clouds and thick darkness.*

Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, is speaking in the context of exile and restoration.

As God led Israel like a flock out of Egypt –
so now God will restore his flock.

Ezekiel 34 is very closely connected with Psalm 23, as God promises:

14 I will feed them with good pasture,

and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land.

There they shall lie down in good grazing land,

and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.

*15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down,
declares the Lord God.*

And yet while God himself declares that *he* will shepherd his flock,
he also says that David will shepherd his flock:

*23 And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them:
he shall feed them and be their shepherd.*

*24 And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them.
I am the Lord; I have spoken.*

And you can hear further echoes of Psalm 23 in verses 28-31 of Ezekiel 34:

They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid.

*29 And I will provide for them renowned plantations
so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land,
and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations.*

*30 And they shall know that I am the Lord their God with them,
and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord God.*

*31 And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God,
declares the Lord God.”*

Isaiah, Amos, Zephaniah, Micah, Zechariah –
almost all of the prophets use the shepherd theme in similar ways.

So when you say “the LORD is my shepherd” –
you are saying something that is intimately connected
with how God brought Israel like a flock out of Egypt –
with how God established David as shepherd over Israel –
and with how God promises to renew exiled Israel and restore the Davidic king.

So how does this help us understand Psalm 23?

Psalm 23 is entitled “A Psalm of David.”

The Hebrew preposition “le” may mean that it is ‘by David,’
or it may mean that it ‘for David’ or even ‘about David.’
That is why the ESV wisely translates it “of David” –
retaining the ambiguity!

We do not know who wrote it or when –
or what might have been the context.

Therefore it would be very unwise to speculate on such things!

If David was the author, then he would be drawing on his own experience of exile –
as he was driven away from the land by Saul.

What we do know is how Psalm 23 fits into the rest of the Old Testament!

And the “of David” is very helpful because it confirms the Davidic context
of the shepherd imagery.

But when you hear “the LORD is my shepherd” who is the “I” that is speaking?

Even in its OT context the “I” is ambiguous.

The title “of David” suggests that David may be speaking.

The Davidic king is acknowledging that the LORD is *his* shepherd.
But at the same time the fact that this Psalm would be sung in worship
urges every Israelite to inhabit this song as well.

And indeed, we should not have to choose:
the fact that the LORD is David's shepherd
means that he is also Israel's shepherd.

And so therefore it is very easy to see how Psalm 23 should be heard
as the song of our Lord Jesus Christ –
as he proclaims that the LORD is *his* shepherd –
but also it is our song, as we are united to Christ.

23:1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

There are two things that a shepherd does:
he leads his flock,
and he feeds his flock.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

With Yahweh as my shepherd I will lack nothing.
I will have green pastures – bountiful food (not that common in the middle east!)
I will have quiet waters to drink
(sheep won't drink out of a rushing stream –
they must be still waters –
literally, “waters of rest”)

In other words, if I have Yahweh as my shepherd, I will have everything that I need.
You see how Jesus lived that out – even the temptation in the wilderness
where there was nothing but stones.
He trusted the word of his Shepherd,
and so he replied, “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word
that proceeds from the mouth of God”

3 He restores my soul.

We are so used to hearing that.
“He restores my soul”
What does it mean?

The word “restore” is simply the word to “turn” or “return” –
and in this form it means to “bring back.”

In Psalm 60 it is used to plead with God to restore victory after defeat by their foes.
In Isaiah and Jeremiah it can be used either to refer to the apostasy (the turning) of Israel,
or to their returning to the LORD.

In other words, all the other uses of this form
are found in the context of exile and restoration.

He restores my life – he brings me back from death.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

God has often spoken of how he redeems his people *for his own name's sake*.
It is not because of *me* that God leads me in righteous paths.

What is meant by “paths of righteousness” becomes even clearer
when you contrast it with what comes next:

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

Literally, the valley of deep darkness.

The image here is that of one of the many wadis in Israel.

If you are a sheep, astray in a wadi,
then you are unlikely to make it back!

With wild beasts and robbers ready to make a meal of you,
the deep dark valley is veritably the valley of the shadow of death!

And while “valley of the shadow of death” is more of a paraphrase than a translation,
it does such a good job of capturing the sense
that only the most hard-hearted translators
have dared to alter it!

(Even the NASB stuck with “valley of the shadow of death!”)

But even in the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil, for you are with me;

Remember what is at the heart of the Abrahamic covenant:

I will be your God and you will be my people.

Remember God's promise to Jacob when he went down into Egypt:

I will go down with you.

When Jacob left the land behind him and descended down into the pit of Egypt,
he feared no evil, for Yahweh, his shepherd, was with him.

And when David fled from Saul and went down to the Philistines,
he feared no evil, for Yahweh, his shepherd, had promised to restore his life.

And when Israel went into exile (in that case for their sins!),
still they feared no evil, for God's promise remained.

Which is what makes last week's cry from the cross in Mark's gospel so heart-stopping:

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabbachthani!

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

The Shepherd of Israel abandoned his sheep!
When our Lord Jesus Christ descended into the valley of the shadow of death,
he descended alone into the exile of hell.

No one else could have survived that path alone.

But our Lord Jesus Christ is not merely the sheep.
He is also the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep!

And because Jesus has walked the valley of deep darkness alone,
therefore when you and I walk that valley,
we need fear no evil!

Because

your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

The Shepherd uses his rod and staff to protect the flock –
beating off their enemies –
but also to correct the flock!

And we ought to find comfort in the discipline of our good Shepherd,
as he gently corrects us and leads us in the paths of righteousness.

2. The King Feeds Me (v5)

But it is here, in verse 5, that the imagery suddenly shifts.

We move from the dangerous wadis and the verdant pastures of the flocks
to a more urban setting of warriors and feasts.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

Where did these enemies come from?

And why is a shepherd preparing a table for a sheep?

As we saw earlier, the “shepherd” is Yahweh.

And in this case, whether it was written by David or about David
the effect is the same:

because the sheep is the Davidic king,
and *in David*, the sheep becomes all Israel.

My enemies are all around –
but you arrange a table in front of me.

(this word for “preparing” is used to refer to preparing an army for battle,
or preparing a sacrifice)

There is continuity between verse 5 and verses 1-4
because just as I have perfect trust in the shepherd,
so also I have perfect trust in the one who prepares this banquet.

you anoint my head with oil;

Anointing the head with oil was done in preparation for the meal.
(This is not the right phrase for royal anointing)

my cup overflows.

The cup has two uses in the Psalms:
either it refers to the cup of judgment which the wicked will drink (Ps 11, 75),
or it refers to the cup of blessing –
e.g., Psalm 16, where it says that the LORD is my cup,
or Psalm 116 which speaks of the cup of salvation.
And since this feast is spread before me by the master of the banquet
in spite of my foes,
we may be confident that this is the cup of blessing –
the cup of salvation which is the LORD himself!

And because the good shepherd leads me
and because he feeds me at his table,

3. Therefore I Will Dwell in the House of the LORD (v6)

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

This verse is fascinating.

“goodness and mercy” (tov and hesed)

“the good” and “covenant loyalty” will follow me.

But not just “follow me” –

that is far too tame a translation!

The word translated “follow” (radaph)

is the word used for when an army pursues you!

In the Psalms it is used for David pursuing his enemies in Psalm 18
and Yahweh pursuing his foes with the tempest in Psalm 83.

Or for that matter, in Psalms 7 and 143,

the Psalmist cries out for help while being pursued down into Sheol!

It can be used by Hosea to speak of how we should *pursue* knowing God (Hosea 6:3),
but this word is never used to refer to something that tamely “follows.”

Goodness and steadfast love are not merely trotting along behind me –

they are *attacking me!*
they are relentlessly *hounding me!*

We so often think of this in such sweet terms:

“surely goodness and mercy will daintily follow me all my days...”

NO!

The good things of God – God’s covenant loyalty –
will pursue me relentlessly and hunt me down wherever I go!

Isn’t that encouraging?

God’s steadfast love won’t accidentally take a wrong turn.

Because the LORD is my shepherd,
his goodness will find me.

It may need to run me over sometimes –
but the hound of heaven is on your heels!

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This may seem somewhat odd.

After all, if this has a Davidic context,
then how can the Davidic king (or any other ordinary Israelite)
dwell in the temple?

Psalms 27:4 also speaks of how the Psalmist desires to dwell in the house of the LORD.
Psalm 92:14 speaks of how the righteous are planted in the house of the LORD.

To dwell in the house of the Lord does not mean to literally “live” in the temple.
Rather, it means to live in the Promised Land,
with everything right.
With the king sitting on the throne –
with the priests offering the sacrifices –
with righteousness and peace reigning over all the land.

We don’t know when Psalm 23 was written.

But it presupposes a time when things weren’t right.

(In other words, it could have been written at any point in Israel’s history –
except David’s coronation day and Solomon’s dedication of the temple!
Otherwise, pretty much any point in human history would work!)

Psalm 23 has become a favorite at funerals.

That is appropriate!

Because Psalm 23 *does* speak in the context of exile, deportation, and death.

Psalm 23 is all about a new exodus, a new march through the wilderness,
and a new settlement in the promised land.

The Shepherd of Israel must once again relentlessly pursue his wandering sheep,
draw them back to himself with his rod and his staff,
and bring them back to the banqueting table in the presence of their foes –
even as they walk through the Valley of Deep Darkness.

And that is what our Lord Jesus Christ has done!
He is the Lamb who sings Psalm 23,
and he is the Shepherd who teaches us to sing Psalm 23.

Do you have any doubt that Jesus is the Lamb who sings Psalm 23?

Then listen to Revelation 7:9-17

*9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number,
from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,
standing before the throne and before the Lamb,
clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,
10 and crying out with a loud voice,
“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*

*11 And all the angels were standing around the throne
and around the elders and the four living creatures,
and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying,
“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving
and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”*

*13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying,
“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?”*

14 I said to him, “Sir, you know.”

*And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.
They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

*15 “Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.*

*16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.*

*17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”*

The Lamb who passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death,
is now the Shepherd who guides us safely through!

Close with “The King of Love My Shepherd Is” (well combines the themes!)