

Today or tomorrow, depending on where and when you are listening to this, is the Fourth Sunday of Easter. Since every year at least one of the readings for this Sunday talks about Jesus as our Good Shepherd, it is often informally called Good Shepherd Sunday. Perhaps no shepherd passage in the Bible is more famous than Psalm 23. We will be looking at this psalm over the next three weeks. Today we will introduce the psalm and look at it as a whole. Next weekend we will look at the first part of the psalm, in which David compares himself to a sheep and the Lord to a shepherd. And the following weekend we will consider the second part of the psalm, in which David compares himself to a guest and the Lord to a generous host.

**PSALM 23. (EHV)**

A psalm by David.

The LORD is my shepherd.

I lack nothing.

He causes me to lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul.

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

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

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

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You set a table for me in the presence of my foes.

You drench my head with oil.

My cup is overflowing.

Surely goodness and mercy will pursue me all the days of my life,  
and I will live in the house of the LORD forever.

Most, if not all, of you are familiar with this psalm. It is probably most closely associated with funerals. And that's not a bad thing, since the psalm is rich in comfort, and funerals are occasions where people are especially in need of comfort. But we are doing ourselves a disservice if we only listen to and think about this psalm at funerals, because it provides much spiritual nourishment for Christians in a variety of circumstances. Let's introduce ourselves to this psalm and look at it as a whole.

This psalm can be divided into two parts. In the first part, David uses a shepherd-and-sheep metaphor. In the second part, he uses a host-and-guest metaphor, where enemies are also present. Notice that I called them metaphors. If you read through the psalm, you will have to confess that God has never appeared to you visibly in the flesh and led you to green pastures and quiet waters. Some of you have never actually lain down in a field of grass in your life. Most of you have never actually walked through a deep, dark valley where death seemed to be looming at every turn. I'm guessing none of you have had your heads drenched with oil, and if someone poured an overflowing cup for you, it was probably you or someone in your family who did it by mistake.

Some people might like to interpret this psalm in a mystical way. They might imagine that God figuratively causes them to lie down in green pastures, leads them beside quiet waters, prepares a table for them, and anoints them with oil when they have stirring emotional

experiences or other positive, invigorating feelings in times of depression or trouble, or even vision-like experiences either in their sleep or while awake. And they associate these experiences with God and attribute them to God. Maybe they are even convinced that they have conversed with God during these experiences. This is what they think of when they think of God shepherding them or hosting them.

Others might like to interpret this in a prosperity way. If life is going well for them, if they are healthy, have plenty of money, financial security, a good marriage, a happy family, and a successful job, then they must be on good terms with God and he is figuratively making them lie down in green pastures and filling their cup to overflowing. As long as they continue living their life right, they don't have to fear any evil.

But these are not understandings or interpretations supported by the rest of Holy Scripture, and there are some hints in the psalm itself that these interpretations are incorrect. For instance, David's closing remark that goodness and mercy will pursue him all the days of his life does not fit with a prosperity interpretation, since those who are prosperous do not need mercy. Mercy is love and compassion shown to those who are in pressing and desperate need. And a mystical interpretation doesn't really fit with being guided in paths of righteousness, since we can have stirring emotional experiences and mystical encounters that have nothing to do with righteousness. In fact, simply following one's heart and feelings often leads to godlessness.

But Jesus settles these questions once and for all in the Good Shepherd chapter of the Bible, John Chapter 10, where he basically explains the first part of this psalm and says that all the shepherding he does, he does through his voice or his word. In 2 Timothy 3:16–17, Jesus's apostle Paul confirms this when he writes: "All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, well equipped for every good work." If the Scriptures are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be complete and well equipped for *every* good work, then God does all his shepherding, hosting, and blessing in general through his word.

Maybe we don't think about this all that often, but that means that Psalm 23 is, in a noteworthy way, a commentary on the blessings of God's word, both law and gospel. David essentially calls God's word a delightful field of green grass, quiet and refreshing waters, a spiritual restoration, a correct path, a shepherd's rod and staff for guidance, care, and protection, a richly spread table, a soothing and gladdening oil, a cup that is constantly filled to the brim, and a lifelong source of goodness and mercy. If we have God's word, we have everything we need and lack nothing. It is also interesting that Jesus intimately joins his word to baptism, which is called an anointing in the New Testament, and to the Lord's Supper, which is called the Lord's Table in the New Testament, and in Psalm 23 we have references both to a generous anointing and to a richly prepared table. David may not have known about these sacraments that Jesus would institute, but the Holy Spirit who inspired him certainly did, and so we New Testament Christians can't help but think of the gospel of Jesus in Word *and* sacraments when we read Psalm 23.

Now, even if we only had this description of God's word and none other, shouldn't that be enough to attract and allure us to make frequent use of God's word, to read and listen to it often, and to appreciate, cherish, and take eager part in the life of the Christian church, which is

the only place where God's word is found? If we didn't have this treasure, what would we have? What would life be? We would have no strength or comfort in temptation and trouble and in the face of death. When things weren't going well, we would only have frustration, anxiety, fear, confusion, and despair. And when things were going well in an earthly way, we would only be proud and arrogant and boast in our own abilities, wisdom, and wealth, proving to be of very little meaningful use to those around us, not to mention that all fair weather is always temporary this side of eternity.

But with this treasure of God's word, we have comfort in temptation, affliction, and trouble. We have strength to persevere in trials and to live in a godly, selfless way, fighting against temptation. We have the knowledge that our life has a divine purpose and plan. We have the assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins. And in the face of death, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we have the sure hope of eternal life in heaven through the goodness and mercy that are ours, yes, the goodness and mercy that pursue us all the days of our life.

As the reformer Martin Luther once said after supper one evening, commenting on this psalm: This description of God's word should "move us to regard nothing on earth greater or more precious than precisely this blessing, that we possess the dear, blessed Word, and can be at a place where we may dare to preach and confess it openly and publicly. Therefore a Christian who belongs to a church in which God's word is taught, whenever he enters its doors he ought to think of this psalm and join the prophet in thanking God with a joyful heart for his inexpressible grace, that he has set him as his sheep in a delightful green meadow, where there is plenty of healthy grass and cool water, that is, that he can be at a place where he can hear and learn God's word and draw rich comfort from it, both physical and spiritual. ... We should learn this art from [David] and, following his example, not only be grateful to God, our dear and faithful shepherd, and extol his inexpressible gift, which he has given to us out of pure goodness, but also earnestly request and ask of him that we may remain in this blessing and never fall away from his holy Christian church." Amen.