

Last week we began looking at Psalm 23, one of the most beloved psalms in the Scriptures. We considered the psalm as a whole and looked at all the many, different, glorious ways David describes God's word in this psalm. Today we want to take a closer look at the first part of this psalm, in which David compares himself to a sheep and the Lord to a shepherd. Listen to the first four verses of Psalm 23:

**PSALM 23:1–4.** (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.

David really sums up the entire psalm in the first verse: "The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing." In the rest of the psalm, David is really just drawing out the rich instruction and comfort contained in that first thought. But in order to understand this idea of God as our shepherd and us as his sheep, we first need to understand some things about earthly shepherding. David used this language because he himself had served as a shepherd for his father Jesse's flock in his younger years (1 Sam. 16:11; 17:32–37). But while he knew exactly what he was talking about, many of us, especially if we have no experience with animal farming, need to be taught about it.

First, we need to understand that sheep are needy, weak, defenseless animals who are prone to stray and get themselves in trouble. There is a video clip on YouTube of a sheep stuck headfirst in a narrow trench along a road. A young man gently pulls it out by its back leg. It immediately proceeds to take about five bounds forward, then leaps into the air and dives headlong right back into the trench about ten to fifteen yards ahead. Their survival does not depend on their size, hunting prowess, intelligence, or ability to defend themselves. They can maybe give a little head butt, but that isn't too effective against their predators. Really, the only thing they can do in danger is to bleat, which can make things worse if the wolf or other predator didn't know exactly where they were. "Where's my dinner? Ah, there it is." Not to mention that if sheep are left to themselves, they will continue to grow wool until it causes mobility problems, overheating, and health problems like maggot infestation. Domestic sheep can only survive under and are completely dependent on the care of a shepherd.

Second, when sheep have a shepherd, sheep live and orient themselves by their shepherd's voice. The shepherd either has his own distinctive call for them, or plays his own distinctive tune on a shepherd's pipe for them. During the riots in Palestine in the mid-1930s, one village had all its sheep and cattle sequestered by the government as punishment. The village residents could redeem their animals at a fixed price. An orphan boy managed to raise the money needed to redeem his eight sheep and goats. The officer told him he was welcome to his animals,

but he laughed at the idea that the boy would be able to pick out his little flock from the hundreds of confined animals. But the boy gave his call on his pipe, and his animals separated from the rest and trotted right out after him.

Third, sheep cannot be trained to lie down, like dogs can. The only way you can cause a sheep to lie down is if it is richly fed, feels completely content and safe, and is undisturbed by any irritants like biting insects, skin problems, or the like.

Fourth, you can lead sheep to water, but if the water is moving quickly, the sheep will not drink. The fast-flowing water makes them nervous. The waters need to be quiet. The shepherd either needs to lead them to some natural pools in the stream, or dig a short channel that leads away from the stream so that his sheep will drink.

And finally, a shepherd would have both a rod and a staff, which served two very different purposes. The shepherd's rod, also called a mace, was about two and a half feet long, with heavy pieces of iron often embedded into the end. It was the shepherd's weapon for attacking enemies of the flock. David once told King Saul he had killed both the lion and the bear with his rod when they carried off sheep from his flock. The shepherd also used his rod for counting his sheep, by causing each of them to pass under it. On the other hand, the shepherd used his staff, which usually had a crook at one end, to gently guide and assist the flock as he led and grazed them.

With all this in mind, we can understand much better what David is telling us in his descriptive and figurative language. We may be needy, weak, defenseless, and prone to stray, but we are not without hope, because we have the Lord himself as our shepherd. Through his shepherding of us with his voice, namely his holy word, we lack nothing that we need for body or soul. He has promised us in his word to provide our daily bread, that is, all our physical necessities, and he has promised to richly provide us with everything we need for eternal life.

David then further spells that out. The Lord causes us to lie down in green pastures. That is, he leads us to a place where we can richly feed on his word. David is talking about what we now call the Holy Christian Church and the means of grace that are found and administered there—namely the gospel in Word, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Through the gospel promises and blessings shared in the Church, he so richly provides for us, physically and especially spiritually, that we are spiritually full, undisturbed, and completely content and safe. In John Chapter 6, Jesus says that he is the Bread of Life who feeds us so that we never go hungry and that the life we get from him is eternal life.

The Lord also leads us beside quiet waters. In some ways, this is simply an extension of the picture of Jesus providing especially for our souls. Just as Jesus calls himself the Bread of Life in John Chapter 6, so he essentially calls himself the Water of Life in John Chapter 4. He tells us, "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water bubbling up to eternal life."

But we don't just think of water as a necessity of life. We also think of it as relief—relief from heat and exhaustion. So we can think of the green grass of his word as the way that his word instructs and feeds our souls under normal circumstances—telling us of our sin and the eternal punishment it deserves, telling us of God's grace, forgiveness, and salvation through the birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, telling us of how he cares for us and

protects us physically and spiritually, telling us how he will take our souls to be with him in heaven when we die, and how he will raise our dead bodies on the Last Day and reunite them with our souls. We can then think of the quiet water of his word as the way that his word revives and restores us in all kinds of trials and troubles, when the gospel teachings of his word provide us with special comfort and consolation in our physical ailments, in times of distress, in our struggles against temptation and sin, and especially in the face of death. In Psalm 46, God says that he is help most readily found in distresses, ready to give us a drink from the cool, quiet water of his word when our souls are exhausted.

David then says that God restores his soul or his life. It could also be translated, “He brings my soul back.” David seems to be using this phrase to explain more straightforwardly the picture language he has been using. But he is not just alluding to refreshment and revival in difficulties, but also to repentance. When we go astray, Jesus doesn’t just let us go and write us off. He goes after us to bring our souls back and to lead us to repentance. He often does that through Christian parents and family members, Christian friends, and Christian church leaders.

He does that so that he can keep us on the right paths, the paths of righteousness. But he doesn’t do this because we’re such attractive sheep or because we have earned this effort from him. He does it for his own name’s sake, for the sake of his grace, for the sake of his holy life and innocent suffering and death on our behalf. He uses his law to keep us from wandering off into the thornbushes of pride and self-assurance, and he uses his gospel to keep us from falling into the ditch of hopelessness and despair.

David concludes this part by saying: “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.” Even when we are in situations where everyone and everything else have abandoned and forsaken us, the Lord never does. Through his word and through the faith in him he has planted in our hearts by his word, he is always at our side. His word is there as a rod to protect us from our enemies, especially from the wolf known as the devil, who wants to snatch us and drag us into the lair of hell, but also from the sinful world and our own sinful nature. Through his word, he is always keeping track of us. We never escape his notice. Through his word, he gently guides and assists us, so that we don’t get seriously injured, go astray, or get lost. Because of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead, death itself holds no terrors for us. Jesus goes with us through that dark valley, through those dark doors, and brings us out safely to the other side, to the perfect pastures of heaven.

As I mentioned, it’s all summed up in that first verse: “The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing.” By ourselves, we lack everything and are doomed to death and hell. But with the Lord as our shepherd, as members of his flock through his gift of faith in his Son, he leads and guides and pastures and protects us with his word, so that we have everything we need for this life and especially for the next. As Jesus said in John Chapter 10: “I give them eternal life and they shall never perish.” Amen.