

The Lord is Our Shepherd  
Psalm 23

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.**

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is certainly one of the best known and best loved passages of the Bible. Why is it so greatly loved? Because it describes in such powerful and moving images the complete security we have in God. It tells us that God has made provision for our every need—body, soul and spirit—both now and into eternity.

**He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters.**

God has provided for our most basic needs. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm tells us that our Lord provides for these needs in the same way that a shepherd provides for the needs of his flock. He leads them into a lush, green pasture that is watered by a gently flowing brook of crystal clear water. There the sheep can eat and drink until they are satisfied. Then they can lie down on the soft, cool grass and sleep without fear, knowing that the shepherd is watching over them to protect them from all harm.

I've mentioned before that Charles Allen, who was pastor of First United Methodist Church in Houston for many years, in his book, "God's Psychiatry" recommended to those who have trouble going to sleep at night, that they recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm slowly and, as they do, picture the sheep, filled and content, quietly sleeping in the grass beside a babbling brook under the watchful eye of the shepherd. You will find yourself gradually relaxing, letting go of the anxieties which were keeping them awake and gently drift off to sleep.

**He restoreth my soul.**

When you wake up in the morning, rested and refreshed from a night of anxiety free sleep, you find that your soul is restored. You feel better about life and about yourself. Many of the niggling little things that have been eating at you just seem to go away. You become aware of your many blessings. You rejoice in the goodness of life, the beauty of nature, the pleasure of family and friends.

**He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.**

And you become a better person. When you get right down to it, most of the things we do that we are not proud of are done times of stress, when we are so concerned about things that we are not thinking clearly. Fearful, frightened people are not pleasant to be around. They don't even like themselves.

When we are calm and rested, we made far better decisions and are more sensitive to the needs and concerns of the people around us. We are better people.

When we place ourselves in the care of the Good Shepherd, he does lead us in the paths of righteousness. He enables us to be better people than we are when we are trying to face life on our own. We are better people, not because we have made ourselves into better people, but because God's loving care makes it possible for us to be our best selves.

So, when the Lord leads us in the paths of righteousness, it is for his name's sake, not ours. All the credit belongs to God, not to us.

So, the key to being a better person and having a better life is to place ourselves in the Lord's hands and trust God to take care of us. If we will do that, there is nothing to worry about.

**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.**

Wherever life leads, the Lord will be there with us to watch over us and protect us. We will never be alone.

Does that mean we will never be hurt and never experience pain? No. The psalm does not say, "You lead me around the valley of the shadow of death." The shadow of death is a part of life and cannot be avoided. We all walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the deaths of those we love, and, in the end, our own deaths. But the psalm does not say, "You leave me in the valley of the shadow of death." The Lord leads us through the valley of the shadow of death. If we follow the Lord, eventually we always come up out of the valley of the shadow of death.

So, we are not afraid of the valley of the shadow. Nothing can destroy us. As Paul says, "We are afflicted, in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed..." (2 Cor. 4:8-9)

Whatever life throws at us, God is bigger. And God is always with us. "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:37-39)

So, we can even walk through the valley of the shadow of death without fear. Why? Because God is with us, and not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

**Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.**

Nothing and no one can destroy us. If death cannot destroy us, certainly no human being can destroy us. There are always people who are out to get you. That's not paranoia. Paranoia is believing that everyone is out to get you. They're not. Most people are good, kind, loving people, who are glad to do what they can to help us. But there are real lions and tigers and bears, who just love to eat sheep. There are always a few people who, for whatever reason, would get great satisfaction from hurting us.

But we don't have to be afraid of them. Our Lord has a rod and a staff for the very purpose of beating off those who want to harm his own. "Vengeance is mine, thus sayeth the Lord." If we will walk with the Lord in the paths of righteousness, doing our best to do what is right and good, doing God's will, those who want to harm us only end up hurting themselves. They cannot touch us.

That assurance gives us such peace of mind that we can eat a meal with those people without suffering indigestion. I know that's true.

Back in 1972 I was appointed to a little church in East Texas. At first I kept my job as a court reporter, and I would commute to this church on the weekends. Finally I gave up my court reporting job, and Becky and I moved out to this church. Well, in those days I was a total pacifist. I did not believe in using violence for any reason. I'm still a pacifist. But I'm not a total pacifist. I only believe in using violence as a last resort to protect innocent people.

As a pacifist, I was opposed to war. And one Sunday I preached a sermon on pacifism. Keep in mind that this was in 1972, and we were in Viet Nam. Feelings were running very high for and against our involvement in that war. A week or two later, at a meeting of the Administrative Board, the chair of the Board announced that this church was pulling out of the United Methodist Church because this church fully supported the war in Viet Nam.

I'm sitting there thinking, "Now what? I just left my job to be the preacher of this church." But I left my job trusting God to provide for us. So, I said prayer and put it in the Lord's hands. I went up to the podium and said, "You do what you think best. I only ask that you do think about this very carefully and prayerfully."

The next week we had a church-wide potluck lunch. I got my food and sat down, and there, across the table from me was the Administrative Board Chairman. I look back now and wonder how I was able to eat my food, knowing how angry he was with me. Yes, he was so angry he wanted to take the church out of the denomination so that he could get rid of me. But the truth was that I liked that old man. He was honest and good-hearted. We disagreed on an issue. But I was not angry with him. We sat and swapped stories and laughed and had a good time.

At the next board meeting he announced that they were not leaving the United Methodist Church. It turns out you can leave a United Methodist church, but you can't take the church with you. It's illegal. I stayed there five more years, and that church is still one of the best United Methodist student charges in our conference.

My point is not that the administrative board chair changed his mind because he and I shared a meal together. God had already taken care of that decision, and we just didn't know it. My point is that because I trusted God I was able to share a meal joyfully and without anxiety with a man who wanted to hurt me.

### **Thou anointest my head. My cup runneth over.**

When we put our faith in the Lord, we are anointed by the Spirit, and it affects our thinking and our view of the world. We are not afraid of people or circumstances. We are at peace. We are so filled with God's goodness and love that our hearts and our lives overflow with the joy and the goodness of life. We don't have to measure out our enjoyment of life. We have more of the goodness of life than we can keep up with. We are running as fast as we can to enjoy as much as we can, and we still can't keep up with all of it.

### **Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

And the best news is that it will never end. God's goodness and mercy will flow down on us all the days of our lives. And we will dwell in God's presence forever.

All this is ours, if we will just entrust our lives to the Good Shepherd and walk with the Lord in faith.

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