

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

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Studies in Rescue and Redemption

Lesson Five

A Strong Shepherd

Focal Text

Psalm 23

Background

Psalm 23

Main Idea

Our covenantal God protects us and provides for us.

Question to Explore

How does the Lord reveal himself as our shepherd?

Quick Read

Based on his personal experience, David shared his assurance that God will both protect and provide for us, even in the darkest moments of our lives.

Introduction

Psalm 23 is among the most famous sections of Scripture in the entire Bible. It is referred to as the “Shepherd’s Psalm” and the biblical heading for the chapter (technically known as the “superscription”) is labeled a “psalm of David.” In David’s childhood, he was a shepherd who cared for his father Jesse’s sheep, near Bethlehem. He was thrust into the limelight following his dramatic defeat of the Philistine giant Goliath (cf. 1 Samuel 16-17).

As a shepherd, the Scriptures tell us that David was both brave and protective. Thus, referring to God as “my shepherd” would have suggested the comforting image David knew so well—both in bringing his sheep to food and water, and also protecting them

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from dangerous wolves or other predators. By comparing God to a shepherd, the psalmist is implying that God leads, feeds, and directs his path, just as he had done for his sheep. Remember that Jesus also reminds us that he is the “good shepherd” in John 10.

Hudson Taylor was a missionary who placed his full trust in God's faithful protection. In his journal he once remarked about how “our Heavenly Father” knows that we wake up every morning with a “good appetite.” Somehow in God’s provision, most of us do not go through the day hungry.

Taylor further remarked about God’s miraculous provision for the Israelites during their period in the wilderness—when as many as three million traveled for forty years. He notes that God provided for all their needs in the desert. Then he made the following application. As a missionary working in China, he said, “We do not expect He (God) will send three million missionaries to China; but if He did, He would have ample means to sustain them all . . . Depend on it, God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply.”

The point is clear. The same God who provided for David, for Moses, and for the Israelites, is the same God who provides for us. If he did it once, he can do it again. This is the message of Psalm 23: our God protects us and provides for us. As Paul said, “And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

Commentary

23:1. The metaphor of the shepherd was commonly used to indicate royalty in the ancient Near East. One of Egypt’s Pharaohs (Amenhotep I) was depicted bearing the ruler’s “shepherd’s crook.” An interesting example of this is Hammurabi (ca. 1750 BC), who said he got his kingship from the gods because he fulfilled his royal duty as a shepherd. This connection between royal leadership and the work of the shepherd would also become an important metaphor in Scripture for describing God as both a strong, but tender leader (cf. Genesis 48:15).¹ For David, though, God was not merely *a* shepherd, but “*my* shepherd” (Ps. 23:1; cf. John 10:11).

The King James Version (“The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want”) can be misunderstood when it uses the word “want”—commonly misunderstood as “desire”—but here referring to what might be “lacking” or “needed.” Thus, the psalmist does not mean God shepherds us by giving us anything we “desire,” but rather, God is like a shepherd who provides what we need.² A parallel is the verse that says, “The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing” (Ps. 34:10).

23:2-3. The shepherd takes a series of actions. First, he causes the sheep to “lie down” which means he provides them the opportunity for rest. He then leads them to “quiet waters,” a picture of more than serenity, but of safety which brings refreshment. Finally,

he leads them in the “paths of righteousness” which is another way of saying “the right paths” (or correct paths). The shepherd provides the sheep rest, refreshment, and the right path to follow. He leads, restores, and guides. These pastoral settings of green pastures and still waters paint a beautiful image of the shepherd’s care.

A person familiar with the terrain in Israel knows how difficult it can be to maneuver. It is often dry and desolate, and potential danger lurks if the right path is not chosen. A shepherd needed to know the right location for the sheep to graze and rest, but also the correct path to get there. In a sense, the psalmist paints a scene of abundant life, showing God as a true provider.

A person unfamiliar with sheep needs to know that apart from the care of a good shepherd, the sheep will not survive. Like camels they can go for extended periods without water (and are able to store nine liters of water), but eventually they need quiet waters and green pastures. The winter and spring rains provided such green pastures—although summer and autumn supplied only weeds and stubble left over from the harvest to eat. Since water sources were few and far between, and food sources could be scarce, the sheep were utterly dependent on the resourcefulness, wisdom, and watch care of the shepherd. The psalmist is saying that this is also true of us—we need God’s protection and provision.³

The shepherd provides this care, “for his name’s sake.” A name in the ancient world revealed (or confirmed) the character of a person. Part of the reason the law forbade the misuse of God’s divine name was because it maligned his character (cf. Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11). We are familiar with the modern expression and desire of a having a “good name” (cf. Job 30:8). Thus, the psalmist is saying that God is acting in a way that is in keeping with his character and reputation.⁴

23:4. The ubiquitous phrase, the “valley of the shadow of death,” in modern use has many possible meanings. Quite often it is used to describe death itself. Other times it may denote a difficult period of life or even a scary situation. However, the Hebrew word (*salmawet*) is the combination of two words “shadow” (*sel*) and “death” (*mawet*). It is possible that this merely refers to a very dark shadow (“the shadowiest of all shadows” or “deepest shadow”), and thus may mean only a difficult or trying time in life. However, the Greek translation rendered these Hebrew words as “the shadow of death” (Greek *skias thanatou*), and never mentioned the “valley” itself. What this indicates is that the idea of death or at least the real danger and threat of death were very much in the mind of the psalmist.

If you were to travel east of Jerusalem today, you would encounter these “dark valleys” which can be unbearably hot, treacherous, and indeed dark (since the sun is blocked by the high hills). The terrain in these parts is desolate, dry, and very dangerous. A person walking through this space could be injured and trapped, and in a brief period they would die from dehydration or some other more menacing threat.⁵ Guiding an entire herd of

sheep through the dark ravine of a death valley, making sure the sheep take the “right paths,” would have been extraordinarily difficult.

The psalmist says that he will “fear” no evil because “you” (the KJV says “thou”) are with me. Despite the oppressive and threatening valley of death, the sheep (and conversely the psalmist) remains unafraid because the LORD is with him. The psalmist has very real reasons to fear but they fade in the presence of God.⁶ Notice how the psalmist uses the word “thou” or “you” rather than the more distant “he.” In other words, God himself is being addressed personally. Now the Shepherd is no longer in front leading, but has come alongside to escort.⁷

Part of the comfort the sheep receives comes from the fact that the shepherd is armed with “the rod” and “the staff.” The *rod* was a club or cudgel worn at the belt. The “rod” (*šebet*), shorter than “the staff,” was a mace-like striking weapon for bringing heavy blows against an enemy or attacking beast. It is noteworthy that ancient kings carried a similar object normally called a “scepter” as a visible ornament of royal authority, which can be seen in the paintings (or reliefs) from the ancient Near East.

While the rod was an implement for defense, the staff could also double as a weapon if needed (cf. 1 Samuel 17:35). It was used to guide the sheep—if necessary to control them—after all sometimes discipline provides security (especially if the sheep needed to be directed away from danger).⁸ The “staff” was also used to prod sheep in the right direction, and thus was a metaphor of divine guidance.⁹ The psalmist uses the “rod” and the “staff” as pictures of life with the shepherd—fully secure—as he guides and protects. Furthermore, he is exhorting the reader to imitate the sheep and trust the shepherd.¹⁰

23:5. Suddenly the scene changes to a banquet prepared in the presence of enemies. God is no longer portrayed as the “shepherd,” he is now the “host” of this dinner party. Also shifting is the mood of the psalm (the pastoral landscape suggested both the joys and threats of the migrating flock), to the new picture of the “beleaguered faithful” who are affirmed and honored by God in the very presence of their enemy. God is the host and the psalmist is the invited guest who sits at a table prepared in his honor as a trusted follower—a picture of the ultimate communion with God himself.

Setting out food was a display of hospitality (Gen. 18:1–8; Exod. 2:18–20), while doing so in the presence of enemies was a way of showing true allegiance. In other words, God and the psalmist are in right relationship with one another which leads to God’s blessing and security.¹¹ Thus the shepherd imagery has served its purpose and is now replaced by an image of even greater intimacy. The sheep have survived the threat of the valley and now are pictured in a place of triumph—a well-set table complete with festive oil (cf. Ps. 104:15; Luke 7:46) and a brimming cup.

God, as the host, anoints the psalmist’s head with oil, as was the custom at banquets in the ancient world. A generous host would provide fine oils for foreheads, adding

glistening sheens to one's countenance, or adding a fragrance to a person or the entire room. One ancient Assyrian text describes the king who "drenched the foreheads" of his guests at a royal banquet with "choicest oils," and another ancient text tells of the use of oil for one's complexion in the hot climate. Various products were used, but olive oil could be applied to treat dry or cracked skin, even to the point where some said it could invigorate an old man. By using this imagery, the psalmist describes God as a hospitable host who provides everything necessary for one's refreshment in his presence.¹²

This meal takes place in the "presence of my enemies" and is something akin to a victory celebration where enemies were captives or reluctant guests. In some cases, the guests were even beheaded—as is the case on one stone relief from ancient Assyria that depicts a queen's feast with the head of her enemy hanging from a tree.¹³

23:6. The psalmist finishes by exclaiming that God's "goodness" and "mercy" (or "love") will follow him throughout his life. The word "mercy" translates a Hebrew term used as a key covenant-word, sometimes rendered as "steadfast love" (cf. Ps. 17:7). The word "goodness" suggests a steady kindness and support that one could normally expect from family and friends. Thus, God's qualities show him to be solid and dependable.

The phrase "dwell in house of the Lord" at first blush sounds like a description of either the temple or heaven itself. In fact, one is tempted to imagine the psalmist seeing his life end and then being transferred into heaven forever. As tantalizing as this sounds to our modern ears, we must resist the tendency to make the text say what we want it to (or what we are used to hearing). The "dwelling house" is used in Scripture to denote the temple but is *never* used for the heavenly dwelling place of God—a point made very clear in Psalm 27:4. This meaning is obscured by the description "forever." However, the term "forever" in Hebrew literally means "for length of days" or extended periods (Lamentations 5:20); thus, not indicating one's permanent dwelling in heaven (as many assume).

One challenge in interpreting this passage is the word "dwell"—which is found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the "Septuagint." The term is not in the Hebrew, which would have described the priestly office (since priests lived in the temple precinct). However, the Hebrew text says, "I will return to the house of the Lord" which is the anticipation of future opportunities for worship at the temple (i.e., "time and again").

We know it was not unusual for kings to place their effigies—especially statues of themselves—in the temple before their god, as though they were continually offering prayers—giving continuous representation in the temple.¹⁴ Thus, the entire verse may mean that "goodness" follows throughout one's lifetime since they have a continuous enjoyment of worship in the temple.¹⁵ If so, this describes the blessing that flows from a continuous relationship with God. Furthermore, the picture of this happening at a banquet—a place where individuals who had strong bonds met to show their mutual

loyalty—may be the illustration of God’s covenant relationship (cf. Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples).

Conclusion

The psalmist tells us that God is like a “shepherd.” This means that the Lord is our royal king who provides and protects. The ancients loved to call their kings “shepherds” because they knew of the immediate need of sheep for a shepherd to protect them and to lead them to water and rest. Without the shepherd, the sheep would not survive.

In this way, God is also a shepherd. He is the ultimate source of our provision and protection. What about you? Do you know Jesus as *your* shepherd? What does this mean to you? Has God proven his covenantal loyalty to you through his protection and provision?

Sometimes we are more keenly aware of our need for God when life is difficult (rather than when it is easy). The psalmist describes such a moment when he mentions going through the “valley of the shadow of death.” The “valley” may be a general reference to going through a tough time in life. After all, when going through life’s “death valleys” everyone could use some encouragement. The key word is *through*. God escorts us *through* the difficult days of our lives.

I once heard the story of how early Native Americans trained their young “braves.” The story goes that on the night of their thirteenth birthday—having already learned to hunt, scout, and fish—they would be put to the test. They would be taken to a forest where they would have to spend the night—alone! Up until that moment, they had lived in the safety of their family. However, on that night they would be left on their own, they would be blindfolded and then taken miles into the forest, where they would—in the middle of thick woods—remove the blindfolds.

The young brave would face fear in a new and profound way—every twig that snapped would lead them to visualize some wild animal ready to pounce. Finally, after the long night, the dawn came and with it a massive surprise. The boy would see for the first time the forest in the daylight—with its flowers and trees—and then to their astonishment a figure standing before them. It would be a man, not far away—a mere few feet in fact—armed with bow and arrow. The young brave’s father had been there all along—standing guard over the boy.

This story paints the picture of God’s provision and protection in our lives as well.

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¹ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): The Minor Prophets, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 340; see “Sheep, Shepherd,” *ABD*, 5:1189.

² Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 432.

³ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ps 23:2.

⁴ Wilson, 433.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 434.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 435.

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 129.

⁸ Kidner, 129.

⁹ Walton, 340.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 435.

¹¹ Wilson, 436.

¹² Walton, 341.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁴ Matthews, et. al, Psalm 23:6.

¹⁵ Walton, 341.