

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 opens with one of the most astounding statements that could ever be made. This psalm becomes so familiar to us that we might overlook how astounding it is, but this is the way Psalm 23 opens: “The LORD is my shepherd.” That is the theme of the psalm as well: “The LORD is my shepherd.”

That is so astounding because of who God is. This God is exalted above all. He is the God who is high above the heavens. He is the I AM THAT I AM. And David confesses about this Jehovah that he is *my* shepherd. In fact, what is very astounding in English is perhaps even more astounding in the Hebrew. There are only two words to open the psalm. The Hebrew opening is *Yahweh*—we would say Jehovah—and the next word is *roh-ee*—my shepherd. This Jehovah, who doesn’t need us, is our shepherd. He comes down to us; he cares for us; he leads us as sheep. That is an astounding thing. It is the condescending grace and mercy of God that we have seen many times before.

What stands out in Psalm 23 about Jehovah as our shepherd is the fact of our helplessness. That helplessness is a little bit hidden in the psalm because the psalm focuses mainly on Jehovah’s care of us in our helplessness, so that as you go through the psalm, all you can see is that care. But if you look closely, you will see the helplessness of the sheep and the fact that we constantly need Jehovah to be our shepherd. That is true of sheep in general, that sheep are very helpless. They need the shepherd to take care of them.

Let’s look through the psalm at some of the helplessness of the sheep. First of all, in verse 1, “I shall not *want*.” That word *want* means *lack*. It means an emptiness. It means that I don’t have what I need. Now, the confession is “I shall not want,” but in that confession is also this confession: by myself I would want. I would lack. I would be empty. There is nothing I can provide for myself. And so it is for sheep. Sheep cannot provide for themselves. They don’t know where the good pastures are. The shepherd has to lead them to those good pastures. And that Jehovah does. “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters ” (v. 2).

Sheep are also very easily distressed. We see that in verse 3: “He restoreth my soul.” Now, what is on the foreground there is what God does: he restores my soul. But if you look underneath that, you see the distress that the sheep are always subject to. Sheep become afraid. Sheep don’t know which way to go. Sheep are prone to stampede and to panic. Sheep are distressed. But Jehovah our shepherd comforts us in our distress, restoring our souls; and he restores our souls by leading us in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. There too the helplessness of the sheep is seen. We don’t know the path. We don’t know the way. We have to be led in that path.

Verse 4 speaks of the dangers that threaten the sheep—and the other remaining verses speak of these dangers too. There is the valley of the shadow of death. This refers to the fact that shepherds in the part of the world where David lived, in Canaan and that area, would take their sheep through the mountain passes into the fields where they would feed those sheep for a time. The only way to get to those summer feeding grounds, which were rich and luxurious and beautiful, was through narrow gullies and narrow paths, where there were all kinds of dangers. A sudden summer storm could flood a gully with water, so that the sheep were in danger of being washed away. The enemies that wanted to have the sheep for prey could hide in the corners of those gullies. So these were very dangerous places for the sheep. These were valleys, and over them hung a shadow of death. Yet in that valley of the shadow of death, “I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” The shepherd had his rod, his club, so that if the enemy approached he could throw that rod like a weapon and, having

practiced with it, was an expert at aiming it and could drive away the wild animals. And the shepherd had his staff, with which he could guide the sheep and take hold of them and pull them back onto the path.

In verse 5 there are enemies. “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies”—enemies who thought to make a meal of the sheep, but God so protects his people that, instead of the enemies’ making a meal of the sheep, God makes a meal *for* his sheep of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that he is our food and our drink. “Thou anointest my head with oil.” That is a reference to the medicines that the shepherd would use, so that we see the threat of disease for the sheep: they could get sick; they could get disease in their eyes that would be very painful and eventually would blind them; they could get disease in their nostrils that would be very painful and cause tremendous suffering. But the oil that the shepherd poured over them would keep those diseases at bay. “My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.” There too we see the helplessness of the sheep. What are the sheep going to do all the days of their lives? They can’t protect themselves even one of those days. But the Lord follows them with goodness and mercy. And what about when the earthly sojourn of the sheep is finished? What happens to them then? The Lord brings them into his house forever.

Here in Psalm 23 we see the utter, utter helplessness of the sheep; but we see also the powerful, sovereign grace of Jehovah to keep his sheep. And Jehovah does all of this through the Lord Jesus Christ, as Jesus himself made clear in John 10. “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” (v. 11). Jehovah cares for us and feeds us and leads us through the valley of the shadow of death and causes us to fear no evil and prepares a table before us, all through our savior. That was our savior’s work on this earth: preparing a table of our salvation, leading us onward as our good shepherd, following us with his goodness and mercy, and preparing a home in which we will live with him forever.

The result of that perfect care of the savior for the sheep is the quiet and calm of the sheep, who behold that savior by faith. “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters”—so that the note that sounds throughout Psalm 23 is not a note of fear or defeat but a note of quiet and calm, a note of faith, a note of resting in the Lord Jesus Christ.