

Millions of people have memorized this psalm, even those who have learned few other Scripture portions. Ministers have used it to comfort people who are going through severe personal trials, suffering illness, or dying. For some, the words of this psalm have been the last they have ever uttered in life.

-James Montgomery Boice

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W. PHILLIP KELLER

A
Shepherd
LOOKS AT
Psalm
23



“There is one difficulty that arises when writing a book based on a familiar portion of the Scriptures. One disillusion or disenchant the reader with some of his or her former notions about the Psalm. Like much spiritual teaching, the 23rd Psalm has had a certain amount of sentimental imagery wrapped around it with no sound basis in actual life.”

-W. Phillip Keller

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. (NIV)

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. (ESV)

-Psalm 23:1

“This is the utterance of weakness and of trust. In the Bible, as in the Person of our Savior, the human and the Divine are found, not apart [from one another], but in closest union. God spoke not merely by the lips or pens of the prophets, but by the men themselves. As **2 Peter 2:21** says in the **NIV**: **“For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”** Were an angel to say, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” this would bring no assurance to a frail, sinful heart. (...) Only the voice of a brother man, weak and needy as ourselves, can speak this word, the key-note of the whole psalm, “my Shepherd.”

-Eerdman's Pulpit

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

-Psalm 23:2

“The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very makeup it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met. Owing to their timidity they refuse to lie down unless they are free of all fear. Because of the social behavior within a flock, sheep will not lie down unless they are free from friction with others of their kind. If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. Only when free of these pests can they relax. Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. They must be free from hunger. It is significant that to be at rest there must be a definite sense of freedom from fear, tension, aggravations, and hunger. The unique aspect of the picture is that it is only the sheepman himself who can provide release from these anxieties.”

-W. Phillip Keller

“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. 11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

-John 10:7-10

“He [the Good Shepherd] is the owner who delights in His flock. For Him there is no greater reward, no deeper satisfaction, than that of seeing His sheep contented, well fed, safe, and flourishing under His care. This is indeed His very “life.” He gives all He has to it. He literally lays Himself out for those who are His. He will go to no end of trouble and labor to supply them with the finest grazing, the richest pasturage, ample winter feed, and clean water. He will spare Himself no pains to provide shelter from storms, protection from ruthless enemies and the diseases and parasites to which sheep are so susceptible. (...)

“From early dawn until late at night this utterly selfless Shepherd is alert to the welfare of His flock. (...)

“Nor even at night is he oblivious to their needs. He sleeps as it were “with one eye and both ears open,” ready at the least sign of trouble to leap up and protect his own.

“This is a sublime picture of the care given to those whose lives are under Christ’s control. He knows all about their lives from morning to night.”

-W. Phillip Keller

He restores my soul.

-Psalm 23:3a

“In studying this (23rd] Psalm it must always be remembered that it is a sheep in the Good Shepherd’s care who is speaking. (...) This being the case, one might well ask, “Why then this statement, ‘He restores my soul?’” Surely it would be assumed that anyone in the Good Shepherd’s care could never become so distressed in soul as to need restoration. But the fact remains that this does happen. Even David, the author of the Psalm, who was much loved of God, knew what it was to be cast down and dejected. He had tasted defeat in his life and felt the frustration of having fallen under temptation. David was acquainted with the bitterness of feeling hopeless and without strength in himself. In Psalm 42:11 he cries out, “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God.”

Now there is an exact parallel to this in caring for sheep. Only those intimately acquainted with sheep and their habits understand the significance of a “cast” sheep or a “cast down” sheep. This is an old English shepherd’s term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up again by itself.

A cast sheep is a very pathetic sight. Lying on its back, its feet in the air, it flays away frantically struggling to stand up, without success. Sometimes it will bleat a little for help, but generally it lies there lashing about in frightened frustration. If the owner does not arrive on the scene within a reasonably short time, the sheep will die. This is but another reason why it is so essential for a careful sheepman to look over his flock every day, counting them to see that all are able to be up and on their feet. If one or two are missing, often the first thought to flash into his mind is, One of my sheep is cast down somewhere. I must go in search and set it on its feet again!”

-W. Phillip Keller

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin! (...) 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right[b] spirit within me. 11 Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit.”

-Psalm 51:1-2,10-12

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

-John 1:9

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

-Psalm 23:3b

“Sheep are notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves, they will follow the same trails until they become ruts; graze the same hills until they turn to desert wastes; pollute their own ground until it is corrupt with disease and parasites. Many of the world’s finest sheep ranges have been ruined beyond repair by overgrazing, poor management, and indifferent or ignorant sheep owners. (...) A commonly held but serious misconception about sheep is that they can just “get along anywhere.” The truth is quite the reverse. No other class of livestock requires more careful handling, more detailed direction, than do sheep. No doubt David, as a shepherd himself, had learned this firsthand from tough experience. He knew beyond dispute that if the flock was to flourish and the owner’s reputation was to be held in high esteem as a good manager, the sheep had to be constantly under his meticulous control and guidance.

Keller continues: “The first sheep farm I purchased as a young man was a piece of derelict land that had been “sheeped to death.” An absentee owner had rented the place to a tenant. The latter simply loaded the ranch with sheep then left them pretty much to their own ways. The result was utter desolation. Fields became so overgrazed and impoverished they would grow little but poverty grass. Little sheep trails had deteriorated into great gullies. Erosion on the slopes was rampant, and the whole place was ravaged almost beyond repair. All of this happened simply because the sheep, instead of being managed and handled with intelligent care, had been left to struggle for themselves — left to go their own way, left to the whims of their own destructive habits. The consequence of such indifference is that the sheep gnaw the grass to the very ground until even the roots are damaged.”

-W. Phillip Keller

““He leads me in paths of righteousness.” [Well,] first, we must not think that this is something so automatic we don’t need to pray for it. Look at David’s prayer in **Psalm 25:4–5: “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.”**

“In Psalm 23, God has answered this prayer — God has led him in paths of righteousness.

“But how does God do this? In my experience I have never seen a visible manifestation of God going before me at a fork in the road. Nor have I ever heard an audible voice that was clearly God’s telling me which decisions to make. But I think David would answer the question, How does God lead? by saying, “He has revealed a lot about the paths of righteousness in his word.” Isn’t this the point of **Psalm 119:105: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,”** and **Psalm 119:9: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.”** So one answer to the question, ‘How does God lead me in paths of righteousness?’ is: He reveals what those paths are in his word for us to read and obey.

“But this answer is only half of what goes into God’s leadership. By itself the Bible would not keep us on track. For two reasons: one is that not every decision we have to make is covered by a command in the Bible. Some paths are clearly wrong and some are clearly right, but many are not clear. We have hundreds of little and some big decisions like this every week. The other reason that the Bible alone is not adequate is that even when a specific path is commanded, it is not just the movement along that path that is important, but also the spirit in which we move, and the motivation that prompts us. A path of righteousness is a right path followed with the right attitude. But the Bible by itself will not change our attitude.

“This is why David said God leads us in paths of righteousness and why Paul said in Romans 8:14, “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” We must not only have revelation from outside, namely, the Bible; we must also have transformation from the inside by the Holy Spirit. The word of God and the Spirit of God together provide the leadership we need. Paul said in Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

“In order to walk in paths of righteousness we must become new. Otherwise we may try to follow righteousness but will only become hollow formalists — people who try to go through the external motions of righteousness but lack the joy and love and peace that energize and guide the saints. The word and the Spirit team up to transform the mind, and in that way God leads us in paths of righteousness. He gradually shapes our thinking and molds our emotions, so that when there is no explicit command in the Bible to guide us, we weigh all the considerations with the wisdom and the love of God, and we are drawn to the path of righteousness. So I have learned to do like David: meditate on God’s word day and night and pray continually for the work of the Holy Spirit in my heart and mind.” Writes John Piper in his message on Psalm 23.

-John Piper

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.

-Psalm 23:4

“The rod and the staff were instruments used by a shepherd. The idea is of a sturdy walking stick, used to gently (as much as possible) guide the sheep and protect them from potential predators. (...) There is some debate among commentators as to whether David had the idea of two separate instruments (the rod and the staff) or one instrument used two ways. The Hebrew word for rod (shaybet) here seems to simply mean “a stick” with a variety of applications. The Hebrew word for staff (mish-ay-naw) seems to speak of “a support” in the sense of a walking stick. These instruments (or instrument) of guidance were a comfort to David. It helped him – even in the valley of the shadow of death – to know that God guided him, even through correction. It is a great comfort to know that God will correct us when we need it.”

-David Guzik

First, one from a man in Myanmar: “I like this Bible verse because when I need to face difficulties, I know that He is with me. I don’t need to feel fear. I can stay calm and feel secure. This passage gives me much strength to face hardships.”

—Brother Ko Aung*, Myanmar

And this is from a woman they’ve named Mirjam, in Eritrea: “The first arrest of my husband was when we were engaged. He was suddenly picked from his house. In Eritrea, your life is always at risk. Though we are afraid, at the same time we are also living boldly. This verse assures me: Even though you are in prison, even though you are on the streets, even though you are being hunted, God is with you, wherever. And God understands what we are passing through. Jesus understands. He passed through this for us.”

—Mirjam*, Eritrea

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

-Psalm 23:5a

“Sheep do not eat from tables. Since David – the author of this Psalm – compared himself to a sheep and referred to God as his Shepherd, it seems inconsistent that David would suddenly switch from the imagery of green pastures to that of a banquet table. However, the concept of a flat-topped "tableland" does fit the pastoral picture that David has presented throughout this Psalm.”

“The idea of a tableland made even more sense when I learned that the Spanish word for "table" is mesa. The English language has borrowed that Spanish word so that speakers of English use mesa to refer to a tableland that is flat on top and has a steep or abrupt slope on at least one side. The Spanish word for such a land formation is meseta.

While the low coastal plain on the western edge of Israel is about 20 or 30 miles in width, the main backbone of the country is a central range of medium-sized mountains that run from north to south. These mountains rise from 4,000 to 7,000 feet above sea level.

Although the formation of a tableland is a natural occurrence, the shepherd still must work to clear the area of poisonous plants, weeds, stones, and other hindrances that might make the environment inhospitable to sheep. He must also create a safe environment for the sheep so that they do not become nervous or frightened. Anxious sheep can run, hurt themselves, and send panic through the flock so that other sheep are injured as well. No matter how much the sheep owner strives to keep predators away, wolves and other hungry enemies are always watching for that one stray sheep that could be dinner!”

“The parallel in the Christian life is that Christ, our great Good Shepherd, has Himself already gone before us into every situation and every extremity that we might encounter. We are told emphatically that He was tempted in all points like we are. (...) He has known our sufferings, experienced our sorrows, and endured our struggles in this life; He was a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief. Because of this He understands us; He has totally identified Himself with humanity.

“He has, therefore, a care and compassion for us beyond our ability to grasp. No wonder He makes every possible provision to ensure that when we have to cope with Satan, sin, or self, the contest will not be one-sided. Rather, we can be sure He has been in that situation before; He is in it now again with us, and because of this, the prospects of our preservation are excellent. It is this attitude of rest in Him, of confidence in His care, of relaxation as we realize His presence in the picture that can make the Christian’s life one of calm and quiet confidence.

“The Christian walk can thus become a mountaintop experience—a tableland trip— simply because we are in the care and control of Christ, who has been over all this territory before us and prepared the “table” for us in plain view of our enemies who would demoralize and destroy us if they could.”

-Phillip Keller

you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

-Psalm 23:5b

“As one meditates on this magnificent poem it is helpful to keep in mind that the poet is recounting the salient events of the full year in a sheep’s life. He takes us with him from the home ranch where every need is so carefully supplied by the owner, out into the green pastures, along the still waters, up through the mountain valleys to the [cooler and verdant] high tablelands of summer.

“Here, now, where it would appear the sheep are in a sublime setting on the high meadows, where there are clear running springs, where the forage is fresh and tender, where there is the intimate contact with the shepherd, suddenly we find “a fly in the ointment,” so to speak.

“For in the terminology of the sheepman, “summertime is fly time.” By this, reference is made to the hordes of insects that emerge with the advent of warm weather. Only those people who have kept livestock or studied wildlife habits are aware of the serious problems for animals presented by insects in the summer. (...)

“Their attacks on animals can readily turn the golden summer months into a time of torture for sheep and drive them almost to distraction. (...) “Sheep are especially troubled by the nose fly, or nasal fly, as it is sometimes called.

“Only the strictest attention to the behavior of the sheep by the shepherd can forestall the difficulties of “fly time.” At the very first sign of flies among the flock he will apply an antidote to their heads. I always preferred to use a homemade remedy composed of linseed oil, sulfur, and tar, which was smeared over the sheep’s nose and head as a protection against nose flies.

“What an incredible transformation this would make among the sheep. Once the oil had been applied to the sheep’s head, there was an immediate change in behavior. Gone was the aggravation, gone the frenzy, gone the irritability and the restlessness. Instead, the sheep would start to feed quietly again, then soon lie down in peaceful contentment.”

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

-Psalm 23:6

“Note David's resolute persuasion and consider how he came unto it; namely, by his experience of God's favour at various times, and in various ways. For before he wrote down this resolution, he numbered up divers benefits received of the Lord; that he fed him in green pastures, and led him by the refreshing waters of God's word; that he restores him and leads him in the paths of righteousness; that he strengthened him in great dangers, even of death, and preserveth him; that in despite of his enemies, he enricheth him with many benefits. By means of all the mercies of God bestowed on him, he came to be persuaded of the continuance of the favour of God towards him.”

-William Perkins