

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

Text: Psalm 23 (NIV) "My Shepherd"

A Sunday school teacher asked her group of children if any of them could recite the entire twenty-third psalm. A golden-haired, 4 ½ year old girl was among those who raised their hands. A bit skeptical, the teacher asked if she could really say the entire psalm. The little girl stood up, faced the class, made a little bow, and said: "The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I want." She then bowed again and sat down. She may have overlooked a few verses, but that little girl captured the message of Psalm 23.

For many of us as long as we can remember the pictures of Jesus, the Good Shepherd in Sunday School leaflets, in our Bible story books, or hanging on our walls, have helped us understand what kind of a God we have.

"The Lord is my shepherd..." Generations have memorized it. It is one of the first Bible passages we learn, and, often it is among the last words said over us when we die, and heard again by those who mourn at a funeral.

This psalm is a wonderful affirmation of our faith in God's love, his care for us at all times and his ability to protect.

This psalm is an expression of what it means to enjoy perfect peace of mind, a peace of mind that flows from an **undoubting** trust in God. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."

It is clear that the writer, David, has passed through many bitter experiences, fought many battles, come close to death, and has experienced the serenity, the peace of mind and, in danger, the strength that comes from his loving God.

It is worth noting the strong use of the words "I" and "my". "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me..." Even though the words "I", "me" and "my" appear on every line of the psalm, the focus is not on the writer but God. David, the Psalmist, is giving expression to his own personal relationship with God.

The help and confidence that God has given David evokes the picture of a shepherd caring for sheep, and he is trying to describe what the presence of God has meant to him personally. When God is referred to as a shepherd in the Old Testament he is usually the shepherd of a group of people, or of a nation, but in this psalm this shepherding work of God is personal. An **individual person** has experienced God's guidance and presence.

I would guess that there may have been some significant event in the life of David that led him to express his faith and trust in God in such a vivid and striking way. Whatever the circumstances that led David to compose this beautiful song about his trust in God the shepherd, we are grateful

because these words, first sung several thousand years ago, still have a powerful effect on us today as we face all kinds of difficulties, and experience the Lord as our shepherd.

One recent writer has attempted to describe the **leading** and **guiding** experience that may have led the psalmist to see himself as a helpless, lost sheep saved by the shepherd. The story goes like this:

A man is on a journey. The blazing midday heat of the desert is long gone, and the bitter cold of desert night is coming fast. The road has disappeared into the twilight. The food and water he had packed had run out hours ago, and the traveller is parched and hungry. In the distance, a jackal howls. Fears of wild animals and bands of robbers invade his mind. He regrets having begun this journey, and wonders if it will be his last.

But then the traveler sees a figure on a hillside, outlined against the darkening sky: a shepherd - a common, ordinary man, but one who knows these hillsides and ravines. The shepherd goes down to the weary traveller, and leads him up out of the dark valley where danger lurked in the shadows to a place where the last beams of sun still light the way ahead. He leads the traveler to a grassy meadow, and invites him to lie down and rest awhile. The shepherd cups water from the oasis spring in his hands, and offers it. The traveler drinks and drinks and drinks.

And as he drinks, he glances up to see the shepherd's rod, the dangerous-looking club with which he protects the sheep, and his staff, or walking-stick. It is comforting to see these symbols of a man who knows his way through the desert.

When the traveler has rested a bit, the two walk on, following "the right paths" this time, to a black goatskin tent. The shepherd invites the man into his own tent. The inside of the tent is lit with oil lamps and decorated with carpets that are as intricate and beautiful as the goatskin tent is plain.

There is no fear now; the laws of Middle Eastern hospitality are in effect. As long as the traveler is in the shepherd's tent, the shepherd is absolutely pledged to protect him from all enemies.

The two sit cross-legged at a low table, and the shepherd spreads out a meal - a simple meal that somehow tastes better than any our traveller has ever had: steaming lamb stew, soft pita bread, succulent dates. In a timeless gesture of honour, the host pours a flask of fragrant oil over the guest's head, and pours wine into his cup until it overflows.

The fears of night have been transformed; where there might have been terror, there is now serenity and trust. (Author unknown)

Perhaps the situation this psalm describes was a rescue very much like this; the protection and hospitality that David once felt might have been just the thing that led him to write this beautiful psalm. This experience was so moving, this rescue from the very jaws of death so unforgettable, that the writer came to see it as symbolic of God's love.

"The Lord is my shepherd". Because the Lord is looking out for me right now, "I shall not be in want" - I have everything I need.

"He makes me lie down" - I get my proper rest because someone who knows what I need is watching out for me. "In green pastures" – suggests surroundings that lend themselves to comfort and allow me to relax, be nourished, and be myself.

"He leads me" - I don't have to find my own way; I have a guide whom I can trust.

"He restores my soul" - when I am down, he lifts me up, gives me confidence and security.

"He leads me in right paths for his name's sake" – I'm not **ever** going to be left to fend for myself, not because I **deserve** such special attention, but rather because the *shepherd who guides me* is so special. I am protected simply because he is my shepherd who takes care of me.

"I fear no evil; for you are with me." Yes, the dark valleys have been there, and I have had to make my way through them, but I was never alone; the shepherd was my companion. I was able to be confident in the face of adversity. Why? "Your rod and your staff – they comfort me." They are symbols of God's protection over me and the way God guides me.

When I make bad choices, God is there to help me.

When I get into trouble, God is there to rescue me.

When I'm afraid and discouraged, God lifts me up.

When I am tired from life's problems, God picks me up and carries me.

My shepherd has done such a good job looking after me that I am able to live with confidence even in full view of those things and people who want to do me harm. It is as though "You prepare a banquet table before me in the presence of my enemies" - they are powerless to do anything about it; all they can do is watch. God's care has been lavish: "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

And because of all of this I can look to the future with such assurance. "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Some translations even render this as "Surely goodness and mercy will **pursue** me all the days of my life." Like a shepherd going after his lost sheep.

My future is sure and secure. All this is so because "The Lord is my Shepherd." My shepherd provides all that I could ever ask and more.

It's no wonder this psalm has been so popular. This is a psalm for every day and every situation.

In times of sickness or hospitalization;

in those times when we and a loved one have parted, and felt pain so deep it seemed our life was being torn apart;

in those times when the dark night of doubt, or a spell of uncontrolled anxiety or fear overwhelm us;

in those times when we wonder whether God could still love someone who has been such a disappointment to him;

whether young or old, this psalm expresses the love that our heavenly Shepherd has for us and our total trust in that love.

When we are facing those low times in life it's not unusual to feel completely alone, to think that no one could possibly know what we are going through. The message of the Psalm is clear - the shepherd is near at hand, even if we fail to sense him. There is something precious in the fact that the One exalted to rule the universe as king is also our shepherd, who encounters us in our private, dark desert nights, who offers cool water, who watches over us in every circumstance.

But why should we receive such special treatment? What have **we done** so that we are given such security and protection? In fact it's more likely we deserve anything **but** help from God. You and I know very well how much we sin and daily keep on bringing hurt to our relationship with our Shepherd. Yes, our sinfulness does sadden our God but it doesn't stop his love for us. He knows each of us and our special needs, most likely better than we know them ourselves.

The New Testament re-emphasizes the shepherding nature of God. Jesus identifies himself with the shepherd that David spoke of with such affection and trust when Jesus says in last Sunday's Gospel reading, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me... and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:14). He is our shepherd who helps, forgives, guides, gathers and protects. He demonstrated his commitment to us when he "laid down his life for us sheep" and he wants us to trust that love.

I don't know all that the future holds for me. That's in the hands of my Shepherd. But of one thing I'm certain: The Lord is my shepherd, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. As that little girl said when reciting the psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I want."

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Your sight.

© Pastor Vince Gerhardy

17th April, 2005

E-mail: sermonsonthenet@outlook.com

Lightly edited by Stuart Elliot March – Mar to May 2026

Delivered on May 3 2026, a week after Good Shepherd Sunday, because an illness prevented delivery on April 26.