

The Lord Is Our Shepherd

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight I'd like us to turn back to Psalm 23, a psalm that I'm sure many of us know very, very well. And we can read again verses 1 to 2.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still water. As we move towards the end of a year, it's always a time to look back with Thanksgiving, to think about all that this year has brought, all that God has helped us with, all the many ways in which he has provided for us.

And as we do that this evening, I think Psalm 23 is a very helpful guide for us. It's a psalm that we know very, very well. I'm sure most of us have been singing it since our childhood.

And the words that it expresses are very, very precious to us. The psalm evokes some beautiful imagery and really gets to the heart of many of the gospel's most precious and beautiful promises. And in many ways, Psalm 23 gets us to think about a journey. Because as we read the psalm, the psalm itself walks through a journey. It starts off with the imagery of a shepherd.

[1 : 25] And so you're out in the hills. It concludes with the imagery of being in the Lord's house. And so that thinks of being in the temple or the tabernacle and being in the city.

And so there's that movement, that journey that this psalm takes us on. And in many ways, it makes us think of the journey of David's own life. David, who wrote this psalm, was the shepherd who then became the king.

And in so many ways, the psalm speaks of the life of the shepherd as David speaking from his own experience. But it's interesting to ask yourself the question, did David write this psalm as a shepherd?

Or did he write the psalm as the king? And we don't really know the answer to that question. But I think that maybe he actually, I think if I was to have to choose, I think I would choose king.

That he actually wrote this later in his life, looking back at his time as a shepherd. But also seeing God's provision and his help and protection as David faced and confronted enemies.

[2 : 31] And as God brought him through that journey of his life. We don't know exactly when it was that David wrote it. But whatever stage in life he was at, this psalm captures the journey of his own life.

And that, of course, makes us think of our own journey as well. So it makes us look back at the past year. Everything that we've been able to do as individuals, as a church. We think of the successes and joyful moments that we've experienced.

We think of the difficult things that we've gone through. And as we come to the end of 2025, we're looking at moving into a new year and all the opportunities that that brings.

And the turning point from one year into the next is just another chapter of the journey of our whole lives. And in many ways, we want the gospel to always make us think about that.

To always think about our whole lives. And who we're living for. And what path we're on. And ultimately, what destination we will reach.

[3 : 39] And Psalm 23 gets us thinking about all of these things. And so it's a beautiful psalm for us to spend a little bit of time in for our last sermon of 2025. And so tonight, I just want us to go through each verse one by one.

To think a little bit about the imagery that David is setting before us in this psalm. And I want us to notice two key things in each verse.

As we go through these verses, we will see that these words describe everything that Christ wants to lead us to. And they describe everything that Christ himself had to leave behind.

And so that's what we'll think about as we go through it. Everything that Christ wants to lead us to. And everything that Christ had to leave behind. And in all of that, we are recognizing that the Lord is

our shepherd.

So we'll just work through it, verse by verse. And we'll start here in verse one. The Lord's my shepherd, I shall not want.

[4 : 51] And straight away, that's language that we can resonate with. We think of a shepherd. We think of somebody caring for their flock. And we see that all around us. Many of you do that week in, week out.

Caring for a flock of sheep. And that would have been a huge part of life in the ancient Near East. As flocks were herded, provided for, led, and protected.

And so the imagery of sheep and a shepherd is language that we can understand and resonate with very, very well. And the emphasis in this verse is that because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

And that is the language of satisfaction. It's a language of there being no lack in David's life. He shall not want.

He's not left empty. He's not left short. And that's all because the shepherd fulfills his role perfectly. That's a key part of the shepherd's role, to make sure that the flock has what it needs, that it's not lacking.

[5 : 59] And that's the opening words of this psalm. That with the Lord as our shepherd, if the Lord as our shepherd, we shall have no lack. The Lord's my shepherd. I shall not want.

And that language of satisfaction is speaking to us so powerfully about where Christ wants to lead you. Christ wants to lead you to the place where you're satisfied.

And I think that's so important for us to remember when we think about the gospel, that that's a key part of what God wants to do for us. He wants to lead us to the place where we're satisfied, where we finally have what we are longing for, what we desperately need.

And that's so important because there are so many times when life has left us unsatisfied. I'm sure that there's times, there's been times in this past year where there was something that you wanted to do.

Maybe it was a holiday you were looking forward to, or maybe it was a milestone that you were aiming to reach. Maybe it was something that you wanted to buy or whatever it might be. And you thought, if I just have that, then I'll feel satisfied.

[7 : 09] And maybe you did for a wee while. And then it fades. And that happens again and again and again in our lives. If we just get that. If we just get that.

If we just get that. And so often in our lives, the thing that we think will satisfy us never quite reaches the expectations that we have.

It never quite satisfies us in the way that we wanted it to, or that we hoped that it would. And very often, very often, very often we can misunderstand the fact that satisfaction is the place that Jesus wants to take us.

People think, well, I can actually be put off following Jesus because we think that in some way it's going to be unsatisfactory. People think, well, actually, I can see that it's important, but it's going to be rubbish. And it might sort out my eternity, but it's going to spoil my life.

And it's so easy to think that following Jesus is going to be unsatisfactory, and we therefore put it off, and we think we're not going to do it. We'd rather go our own way. And of course, when we do that, we're falling into the devil's favorite lie.

[8 : 21] Because from day one, that was what the devil sought to do with humanity, to undermine our confidence in God, to get us to doubt God's promises to us, and to get us to question whether God was actually going to be good to us, and whether he wanted to satisfy us.

And instead, the devil persuaded Adam and Eve, and has persuaded people ever since, that we'll be more satisfied if we make ourselves God, or we make something else our God.

And turn away from following the Lord. And we mustn't listen to that lie, because the gospel leads us to the place of deepest satisfaction.

And of course, that actually makes perfect sense, because the gospel just takes us back to the God who made us, who made us for himself, and it's with him and in him, that we find ourselves at our most complete.

The gospel brings satisfaction. We get many glimpses of that just now. Lots of times. Even times when we're singing in church, or times when we have a sense of God's presence, and help in our lives, or when we face a dilemma, or a difficulty in our lives, and we have that sense of peace, God

gives us many, many glimpses of that satisfaction now.

[9 : 47] But the fullness of it will come in the new creation. When Jesus takes you home, you will know exactly what verse 1 means. I have no lack.

The Lord's my shepherd. I shall not want. Satisfaction. That is where Jesus wants to lead you. And that's what Jesus left behind.

Jesus had perfect satisfaction in the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You imagine all the amazing, satisfying beauty, and glory, and joy, and completeness of heaven.

And Jesus left it behind. And he chose the path of loneliness, of rejection, of isolation, and distress. He became a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. I am sure that as Jesus walked through this earth, and as he walked through the cross, there would have been so many things that he wanted, but he couldn't have, because he'd left them all behind.

[11 : 06] Verse 2, He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me by still waters. If you imagine it was today only a lot warmer, you get a picture of this verse, because it's been beautifully still the past few days.

If you walk along to the pier, it's amazing. The loch is like glass, and there's a stillness, and a beauty, and if it wasn't freezing cold, then you would just stay there all day.

And here we have the imagery of a flock being led to a place which is still, and calm, and settled, and beautiful.

And there is the place where they find green pastures that they can eat, and they find still waters where their thirst can be quenched. All of this is the language of provision.

The shepherd is providing for his sheep. And what you have in verse 2 is everything that a shepherd is meant to provide.

[12 : 14] He's meant to make sure that his flock has food and water, provision and peace. They're able to eat and to drink. They're nourished, they're built up, they're safe and secure.

And so you've got a picture in verse 2 of the flock's needs being met. Everything that they need is being provided for them. And at the same time, you have a picture of beauty and delight.

I love the way it just emphasizes green pastures, there's just that beautiful, lush, summer's grass and still waters, glistening, beautiful and peaceful.

that's where Christ wants to lead you. He wants to lead you to the place where your deepest needs are met.

The place where all your thirst is quenched, all your hunger is satisfied and all the things that we long for are finally provided.

[13 : 20] And every thirst that we have in our lives, every hunger and longing that we have, all of it's revealing a spiritual need. Whether it's if we're longing to do well in school or we're longing to get a better job or if we're longing to have more financial security, if we're longing to carry more responsibility in our lives, if we're longing to have a deeper sense of love from the people around us, all of these longings that we have in our lives are revealing a spiritual need.

The fact that we've been made by God for God, to live for Him, to serve Him, to have purpose, to know Him, to know His love, to dwell together where we support one another, love one another, and enjoy one another and the creation that God has made.

Christ wants to lead us to the place where we'll find all of these, where we'll find our thirst quenched, where we find our needs met.

So often we make the mistake of choosing an inferior alternative, and so we kind of choose, we choose dry pastures and we choose murky waters. We think that stuff, that turning away from God will make us happier and we chase whether it's money or power or attention or whatever it might be and we think that's going to take away my thirst, that's going to take away my hunger and yet it never does.

Instead, it just leaves us longing and empty. Jesus has come so that our deepest longings are met.

[14 : 56] That's where Jesus wants to lead you and that's what Jesus left behind. And so Jesus enjoyed all the fullness and beauty and provision of heaven and he left it behind and he went to the cross where he died in agonizing thirst.

Jesus left the peace and serenity of his father's presence and he went all the way to the depths of horror as he died, a cursed death.

Jesus left the still waters and the green pastures and he walked right into the fiercest storm of all. As we read these words, we're seeing where Jesus wants to lead you.

We're seeing what Jesus left behind. Verse 3, he restores my soul, he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

You've got the language there of being led along paths. Again, that's kind of just capturing the shepherd imagery. You think of walking along, you're trying to go from one place to the next.

[16:15] There's a path that you need to follow and it's so easy for a flock for sheep to wander off that path to stray. The shepherd is the one who brings us back and who leads us onto that path.

In fact, that word restore, it's actually the word that basically means to bring back, to return. And so it's the idea of someone who's wandered off, been taken back onto the right path.

And that's an amazing reminder. There's such an important lesson here. It's an amazing reminder that Jesus does not meet us on the paths of righteousness. Jesus doesn't meet you on the paths of righteousness.

And he doesn't meet you, when your soul is healthy and restored. That's not where Jesus meets you. Jesus meets you when you've wandered off.

Jesus meets you when the paths of righteousness are way in the distance because you've been distracted and pulled away and drawn to something else.

[17:25] Jesus doesn't meet you when your soul is really strong and you come to him saying, well, Lord, come and see my soul. It's all restored. No, Jesus meets us when our soul is bruised and wounded.

And the amazing thing about the shepherd is that when we wander off, he searches out for us and finds us. And when our hearts are bruised and sore, he comes and heals us.

There's such an amazing picture of restoration, healing and direction. Because that is the language of direction, that Jesus as he brings us back, he guides us with a new sense of direction, restoring us, bringing us back and leading us on a new path.

And that's one of the many amazing things about being a Christian. Jesus gives direction to our lives. Now that doesn't mean that we always know which way to turn. There's many times as Christians we face situations where we feel puzzled, confused and we're like I'm not really sure which way to go, I'm not really sure what to do.

But what this does mean is that we know that over all of our lives God is guiding us and we're not wandering aimlessly.

[18:42] Instead we have one that we are following. And it's important to recognize that that guidance comes from God in different ways. God gives all of us ethical direction through his words.

So what I mean by that is that for all of us, for all of humanity, God directs what our ethical lives should look like. In other words, he tells us what's right and wrong. And when we think about the guidance of God, that's really the most important thing for us to think about.

Not so much the biggest decisions about what job to have or what address to live at, but actually how to live our lives day to day by doing what is right and turning away from that which is wrong. God gives us ethical direction to all of us through his word, through the commands that he gives us. And then as individuals, he gives us specific direction and very often that will be through the gifts that we have and through the opportunities that in his providence he opens up for us.

And so we've got different gifts, different abilities, different things that we're able to do and not do. God guides us by them and then in his providence he will open and close doors for us to serve him in our lives.

[19:49] And in it all, in it all, verse 3 is giving us the language of direction, pointing us to the fact that Jesus wants to take us to the place where our lives have a sense of orientation and direction.

That's where Jesus wants to lead you. And that's what Jesus left behind. And so Jesus left radiant light and he descended into the deepest darkness.

And the right path for Jesus to take was the path that loaded our sin onto his shoulders and eventually took him under the wrath of God.

If we turn to Jesus, the burdens fall off our shoulders. But as Jesus turned towards the cross, his shoulders were loaded with all the guilt of every mistake that you and I have ever made.

Jesus wants to lead us to the place where we have a sense of restoration, of direction. But that's what Jesus had to leave behind as he went into the darkness of the cross.

[21:05] And that takes us to verse 4. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I'll fear no evil for you're with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

In many ways, as you think of this verse, you can think about walking through a valley. We've got valleys all around us. Not maybe as big as they are in other parts of Scotland, but still we know exactly what it's like to walk through a valley.

We definitely know what it's like to go for a walk and for it to get dark. And that's the kind of imagery that we have here. And often that can be the case for us, especially at this time of year.

You leave the house in daylight and as you're out, it gets darker and darker and you end up walking through darkness in order to get home.

In the midst of that, we have the language of protection in verse 4. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I'll fear no evil for you're with me and your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

[22 : 09] And so the scene has moved quite significantly from the peace and delight of verse 2 into an image of danger and threat in verse 4. And it's interesting to note that in verses 2 and 3, when everything is sounding maybe more peaceful and more settled, you have the language of he, he, he, he.

And yet when things turn darker, you get the language of you, your, your. And that continues into verse 5.

Maybe, maybe that's a hint to us, that as our sense of urgency and danger intensifies, our personal reliance on the Lord increases.

There's lots of things being brought out in this verse that are so important for us to think about. The valley of the shadow of death can't be avoided. Even though I walk through it, I've got to go through it, it can't be avoided.

And it's reminding us that life is going to bring times of sorrow, times of darkness, times of fear, times when we wish that things were different. But the big emphasis here is not that these moments aren't going to come, it's saying these are going to come.

[23 : 23] The big emphasis is that Jesus is saying, I will be with you as you go through them. I will lead you. I will stay by your side.

I'll never leave you. And so the big emphasis in verse 4 is not so much on the valley, but on the company. The fact that walking through the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is with David. He's not absent. He's present. And his presence is particularly emphasized in the language of protection. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

That's speaking to us so powerfully of the shepherd's role as protector, as leader, as the one who is absolutely going to make sure that his flock is safe.

And so as they walk through that dark valley, as the threat of danger is real, the emphasis is on the shepherd's presence and on the protection that he provides for the flock.

[24 : 27] In other words, Jesus is leading us onto a path where you will never, ever, ever be alone. And that's one of the most amazing promises of the gospel, that there is never a moment when you are alone as you follow Jesus.

That's where Jesus wants to lead you. That's what Jesus left behind. Because in the cross, Jesus, the perfect protector, was left totally exposed.

Stripped naked, nailed to a cross, abandoned. All the way through it, Jesus knew that he could call twelve legions of angels in his defense, but he also knew that the path that he had to take was a path that he had to take alone.

And so his closest friends, they either fell asleep or fled in fear. One of them even betrayed him. And on the cross, even his father's voice was silent.

So as Jesus went to the cross and as he hung on the cross, nobody said to him, do not be afraid. Instead, the protection that we see in verse four is everything that he had to leave behind.

[25 : 49] Verse five, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Now it's a different scene. We're no longer in the language of a shepherd.

We're no longer walking through a valley. Now we're back home and there's a banquet set before David and here we have the language of feasting.

We can definitely relate to this. Just think back to Christmas Day. Think of the amazing food that many of us will have enjoyed. And in this language of feasting, two key things are emphasized.

There's celebration. celebration. Because there's victory. The table, the banquet has been enjoyed in the presence of enemies. These enemies have been overcome. There's a victory.

There's a celebration. And in that victory there is abundance. There's anointing with oil. That maybe is referring to some, maybe to a perfume of some sort.

[26 : 49] I'm not completely sure. There's the emphasis especially in the cup that overflows. It's just a picture of abundance, of plenty, of enjoyment, of amazing provision.

It's a picture of joy and triumph and relief and celebration. And that's everything that the gospel gives us. It gives us joy in the hope that we have through the gospel.

It gives us triumph knowing that death has been defeated through Jesus. It gives us amazing relief. David, this is why I think that David wrote this as a king because he's had to fight off his enemies and now there's relief that he can have a banquet because the fight is over and there's celebration and that's exactly what the gospel gives us.

Joy, triumph, relief and celebration. That's where Jesus wants to lead you and that's what Jesus left behind.

Jesus is the king. He should be at the head of the banqueting table he should be enjoying uninterrupted, unending delights in the presence of his father in heaven.

[28 : 03] He left it all behind. He left it all behind to be beaten and mocked, rejected, spat upon and crucified.

His head wasn't anointed. Instead it was struck a crown of thorns pushed into it. His cup didn't overflow with wine.

Instead his blood was flowing from his side. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

That's everything that Jesus wants to lead us to. It's everything that he left behind. And that takes us to verse 6. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This is the language of security where there's a picture of being safe and protected and provided for and everything is finally settled.

[29 : 10] We notice that in verses 2 and 3 we've got the language of he, he, he. In verses 4 and 5 you've got the language of you, you, you. But in verse 1 and in verse 6 you have the Lord.

And that's a pattern you often see in the Psalms where what you see at the start reappears at the end. It's called an inclusio and it kind of just puts a bracket to mark the start of the Psalm and the end of the Psalm.

And of course that word the Lord is so important because it's God's covenant name as revealed in the Old Testament.

You know that when you see it in block capitals it's the divine name Yahweh revealed to Moses in Exodus 3 and 4. It's all speaking it's God's covenant name it's all speaking to us of God's covenant commitment to his people and the reality of God's covenant commitment is captured so powerfully in the vocabulary of verse 6.

You see that goodness and mercy now that mercy is the word that's often translated steadfast love in other places. It's the Hebrew word chesed and it's the word that speaks of God's unrelenting loyalty his love and kindness towards his people.

[30 : 32] And in God's covenant that's what he wants to show. He wants to show that unrelenting steadfast love. He wants to pour out his goodness upon his people. You also have this language of follow me.

Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And that word follow me really means to pursue me. And there's a kind of persistence and a determination about it.

And the amazing thing there is that often when we think about a relationship with God we think yes we need to be persistent and we need to be determined. That's not what verse 6 is saying at all. It's not talking about you following anyone.

It's talking about God following you with his goodness and his mercy. It speaks to us of his persistence pursuing you with covenant loyalty and love.

The language of dwelling again speaks of being with the Lord that lies at the heart of his covenant objectives that we would be his people that we would be with him.

[31 : 33] And the fact that God's covenant is one that is unrelenting unchanging something that he never ever gives up on is captured so powerfully in the very last verse.

The fact that all of this is promised forever. God's covenant commitment isn't something that's there one day and gone the next. It is something that's there forever.

He's utterly faithful. It never changes. all of this is where Jesus wants to lead you. And all of this is what Jesus left behind.

He left behind the goodness of God and took our sin on his shoulders. He left behind the steadfast love of God and instead endured the wrath of God.

He gave up his dwelling place and born in a manger nailed to a cross outside the city laid in a tomb. He was pursued not by goodness and mercy but by his enemies crucified by the very people he came to save.

[32 : 46] Psalm 23 is so beautiful and so powerful because it tells you everything that Jesus wants to lead you to.

everything that that psalm describes is everything that Jesus wants you to have. But in order for you to have that it's telling you everything that Jesus left behind.

He left all of that behind so that you could be his forever. He left it all behind so that you can say tonight and forever more the Lord is my shepherd.

And I hope every single one of us can step into 2026 with those words on our lips. Amen. Let's pray.