

National Youth Sunday 2016
Mountains or Valleys, the Lord is Our Shepherd (Psalm 23)
Sermon resources by Glenn Bollinger

Life can be fun. Life can be unexpected. Life can be scary.

Whether we are young or old, we have experienced lots of different things in life. When everything is going really good, we might not think about God being with us in the same way we might when things have been really bad. When we stop to think about it, we know that God is with us in all things.

Psalm 23 is a scripture that is very familiar to a lot of people, and yet it is also a scripture that can be overlooked. Some pastors may use the 23rd Psalm in so many funerals that they avoid using it on Sunday mornings! But this is a scripture for all of us. A scripture that reminds us that God is with us when things are going well, and when things seem dark. Before David was a king, he was a shepherd. He knew how to be gentle with his sheep. But he was also strong and brave. David killed a bear and a lion while he was a shepherd. When David wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd,” he was writing about a strong, brave and gentle shepherd. This is a shepherd we can trust. The Lord is our Shepherd, during mountain top highs, and in the darkest valleys.

Psalm 23(NRSV)

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Verse 1 - *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

God cares for us like a faithful shepherd. We don't have to know much about sheep to understand the depth of the commitment a shepherd must have for his or her sheep. Sheep are not known for their keen intellect or great survival instincts, but under the care of someone who is committed to their care, they will be safe.

Verse 2 & 3 - *He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

For sheep, there is nothing better than green pastures! It is a buffet that is there for the taking. This is not an over-grazed patch of grass. This is not a dirty, dusty, dry lot. This is heaven (for a hungry sheep.) And not only is there plenty to eat, there is also a safe place to take a leisurely drink. No fast rapids, that cover the sound of approaching predators, or water that can sweep our feet out from under us. This is the calm cool waters where we can be satisfied.

In verse 2 and in verse 3 we read about what the shepherd is doing for us. The shepherd makes me lie down, the shepherd leads, the shepherd restores, and again the shepherd leads. While shepherds may lead, pasture and guide; only God can restore vigor and life of those who are in His flock. God is really a special shepherd!

Verse 4 - *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.*

No one wants to be alone when they are frightened. At times in our life, we feel very alone, but we are not. God is with us. The image of God carrying a defensive club to protect us, and a staff, which is used to guide, and even rescue us, can give us great comfort. A shepherd would never be without both, in good times and in bad, because the shepherd is always prepared.

Verse 5 - *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

We shift from the image of a shepherd to the image of a host. No good guest would question a host on who they have invited, or even given a place of honor. The idea of a God who loves us so completely that our enemies dare not approach us as God prepares a feast for us, gives us peace. We know we are secure in the presence of God. Not only are we safe, but God honors us. It was a special recognition to be anointed with oil. It showed great favor. But it gets even better. Biblical hosts would signal to their guests that it was time to leave by allowing their cups to become empty. But when a host did not want a guest to leave they would not only keep the cup full, but fill it to overflowing. God desires us to stay in His presence.

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 my whole life long.*

Through mountains or valleys, we remain in the presence of God. Goodness and mercy all the time, all while in the presence of a Lord who cares, protects and honors us.

Questions for reflection:

Do you know someone who is both gentle and strong? Can you trust them? How do you feel when you are in their presence?

When you are feeling lonely or abandoned, where do you turn? Who do you trust to share your most personal thoughts? How can we welcome God into that part of our lives?

Read Psalm 23, but turn it into a negative for example “The Lord is **not** my shepherd, I **shall** want.” How does this change the way you look at the scripture? What verse is most disturbing?

When everything is going great, how do you recognize that God is with you?

When everything is going wrong, or your life is filled with stress, how do you recognize that God is with you?