

“In Good Hands”

Psalm 23

Last week we studied Psalm 16 in which David declared that in the Lord’s presence there is fullness of joy; that at His right hand are pleasures forevermore. We were reminded that being in God’s presence is the ultimate thrill of life. It is the means by which we are able to experience the most intense pleasure, the most complete satisfaction, the purest delight, and the most profound joy.

We talked about the fact that this joy has nothing whatsoever to do with our circumstances—how healthy or comfortable we are or how much money we have or what people think about us or what we do for a living. True joy comes from having a personal, intimate relationship with God. It comes from being in a continual state of fellowship with Him.

Last Sunday, as Mindy and I were driving in the car after the service, she said, “I really do believe that, but it’s hard for me to imagine ‘so and so’ having fullness of joy in her circumstances.” ‘So and so’ is an extended family member who has two adult children who have rejected her and her husband. They are all professing Christians, but for the last several years these children will have nothing to do with them. They don’t visit, they don’t communicate, and they don’t let their children communicate with them.

In the last month, another grandchild was born, causing ‘so and so’ to plunge into even greater despair over their broken relationship, since she won’t be able to see him or know him.

Of course, the situation I am describing is not unique. We all know people who live with perpetual broken hearts because they are estranged from their loved ones. Many of *us* have *personally* experienced the crushing grief and chronic pain that come from the rejection or betrayal of the ones we love the most.

Which raises the question: Is it really possible to experience *fullness of joy* and *genuine peace* in the midst of life’s deepest hurts—prolonged hurts, hurts that don’t go away?

David wrote a psalm in the midst of what might have been the greatest sorrow that I, personally, could ever imagine someone enduring.

It starts in 2 Samuel 13 when we read about Amnon, David’s firstborn son, raping his half-sister Tamar. As if that wasn’t heartbreaking enough, we read later in the chapter that Tamar’s brother, Absalom, another of David’s sons, gets revenge and murders Amnon in a vicious, cold-blooded manner that strikes terror in the entire family.

And if that’s not heartbreaking enough we read in 2 Samuel 15 that this son Absalom, whom David loves very much, secretly conspires to overthrow his father’s kingdom, persuading some of David’s top advisors to join him, then attempts a violent coup that forces David and his family to flee Jerusalem.

And if that’s not heartbreaking enough, in chapter 16 we read that during this coup Absalom publicly humiliates his father David by having sex with ten of his concubines on the rooftop of David’s palace in the sight of all Jerusalem. This plan was conceived because there could be nothing more humiliating and more defiant and more disgraceful for a father than this kind of behavior by his son.

Then, in chapter 17 we read how Absalom dispatched the entire army of Israel, tens of thousands of men, for the express purpose of killing his father David, and how, in the process, twenty thousand of those men died in battle.

It was in the midst of these tragic, heartbreaking circumstances and events, while he was being hunted and hounded in the Judean wilderness, that David wrote these familiar words:

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 paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

⁴ *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.*

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 forever.*

Keep in mind that this psalm was not written by some young idealist who was moved by a beautiful sunset and got a sudden burst of inspiration. This was written by a man with a broken heart, a man who was running for his life from someone he had cuddled in his arms as a baby and cradled in his lap as a little boy, a man whose circumstances wouldn't let him forget for one minute the betrayal and defiance that had been perpetrated against him.

And yet David could declare calmly, boldly, and confidently, **verse 1**. ¹ *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.* “Even in the midst of all this turmoil, all this heartache, all this betrayal, all this mayhem, not only am I doing okay, I have everything I need. I don't lack for anything. Sure, right now I'm homeless, I'm being hunted, I'm separated from my loved ones, I'm not sure what's going to happen tomorrow or the next day. But I'm good. I'm content. I'm satisfied.

Why? For one simple reason. The LORD is my Shepherd.” And if the LORD is my shepherd I'm in good hands. I have everything I need for every circumstance of life.

I'd like you to notice something that we may take for granted in an *individualistic* society like ours. The emphasis here is on the LORD being David's *personal* shepherd. “The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” One of David's struggles at the time he wrote this psalm was his sense of feeling rejected and abandoned not only by his son but by his closest advisors and cabinet members; his sense of feeling detached and estranged from the Israelite community, and the army of whom he had been commander in chief, many of whom had transferred their allegiance to his son, Absalom. David was feeling utterly alone—politically and socially. He was feeling isolated.

But he adamantly declares that in his aloneness he wasn't alone. I have a personal Shepherd who is with me, watching out for me, caring for me, making sure that I'm okay.

I cannot help but think that David's concept of the LORD as a Shepherd came from his own experience as a shepherd during his youth in, coincidentally, this same wilderness. David knew what a good shepherd was and exactly what he would do and what lengths he would go to care for his sheep.

He also knew the nature of sheep, and that their safety and security and health and well-being had nothing to do with the exercise of their own freedom, their own will, their own

strength, their own intelligence, their own talent, their own creativity, or their own resources. They were entirely dependent on the shepherd.

And so in Psalm 23 David puts the name of the shepherd, Yahweh, (The LORD) intentionally as the first word in the psalm because he wants to emphasize *His* provision, *His* capability, and *His* attentiveness to our needs. In fact, particularly in light of his tumultuous circumstances, David wants to emphasize that only Yahweh can satisfy our needs. Only *He* can make sure we're okay when everything around us is falling apart. Only *He* can provide peace and contentment when our world is turned upside down.

And so while David begins this psalm with a confident declaration that because Yahweh is his shepherd he shall not want, he goes on to identify several specific ways in which this good Shepherd meets his needs. The first is found in **verses 2-3a**. ² *He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.* ³ *He restores my soul.*

David continues with the metaphor of the shepherd and sheep, but as you read this don't forget his circumstances, which seem to contradict the idea of green pastures and still waters. David was the sheep and his son Absalom and the entire Israelite army were the wolves on the prowl...for him. What do sheep who are being chased by wolves normally do? They panic. They don't stay still and silent and calm. They scatter and bleat and get fidgety.

And yet David says that when Yahweh is your shepherd you can be in a quiet place in your heart and mind even when predators are on your tail. In the midst of the chase he actually *makes* you lie down in green pastures and leads you beside quiet waters.

If you were to travel through the Judean countryside around Jerusalem even today, the first thing you would notice is the rocky, desolate hillsides. On those hillsides sheep are exposed and vulnerable, and there isn't much for them to eat or drink. But shepherds who know the land are aware of the green pastures that are dotted throughout the wilderness. And they are the desired destinations for his flock, for his greatest concern is their health and well-being. They need nourishment; they need a place where they can be fed.

Furthermore, sheep are afraid of running water; they will only drink from a quiet pool. So, not surprisingly, Yahweh leads David, his sheep, to still waters, where he can drink without fear and be satisfied.

Again, this is intended to be a picture of God's provision, God's protection, and God's tender care at a time when David was heartbroken and his life was in turmoil. Even though those hurts are real and the pain is intense; even though there is genuine confusion about what is going on and uncertainty about what is going to happen, he can rest in Yahweh. David can say, "I know He is with me. I know He is looking after me. I know He won't let anything happen to me apart from His permission. I know He is stronger than my adversaries. I know He is ultimately in control. I know that He loves me. And I know that He is good."

And so, in verse 3, even though he was being hunted and hounded God is taking care of him in such a way that his soul is being restored. Yahweh is refreshing him, rejuvenating him, replenishing him so that he has enough strength and energy to face each day and trust him. In other words, he is not giving way to despair. He's not resorting to self-pity or blame or resentment or cynicism or all the other things to which we *tend* to resort in order to cope with our grievances. He's choosing to accept God's provision, and in so doing God is restoring his soul.

And so David can confidently declare that because the LORD is my shepherd I'm in good hands. I have everything I need for every circumstance of life.

Look what else in **verse 3b**. *He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake*. Or, literally, "He leads me in right paths for His name's sake." Sheep are well-known for their tendency to wander off paths, no matter how well-defined or well-trodden those paths are. And in Scripture we are compared to sheep who have gone astray, each of us going his own way (Isa. 53:6). David, more than anyone, knew this about sheep. Not surprisingly, therefore, the emphasis in verse 3 is that the Shepherd is the *One* who is leading down these paths.

Now, that's not a guarantee that we will always stay on the path. The Shepherd doesn't have us on a leash. We have the freedom to wander; we have the freedom to veer off—even though it's to our detriment when we do. But if we stay close to the Shepherd; if we listen to His voice and follow His instructions, He *will* lead us down the right paths.

And that simply means we will make choices that are pleasing to Him; we will live according to His will which is found in His Word; our lives will reflect His character. And that's the whole point. We do reflect Him. And so, for the sake of His name and His reputation, we need to follow the lead of our good Shepherd down the right paths so that others can see His goodness, and glorify Him.

Verse 4a. *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..."* Even though David is using a figure of speech, here, to describe a stroll through Death Valley, he was not speaking in hyperbole—he was not exaggerating. David was literally running for his life, hiding and sleeping in caves, but always on the move, never staying in one place for very long. And as he traveled from one place to another, usually at dusk in ravines and valleys where the shadows would conceal his movement, he was ever mindful that his adversaries might be lurking around the next corner, or hiding behind a rock, waiting to pounce, ready to strike a death blow.

Were these evening excursions tense? I'm sure. Was David alert and cautious and careful how he moved from place to place? Most certainly. Was he afraid? No. Why? Because the shepherd was with him. He says, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..."*

It's not that he could walk through Death Valley without fear because he was strong and brave and confident in his own abilities to handle his adversaries. Are you kidding? He was outnumbered. He was an old man who was weak and frail compared to those young guys who were chasing him.

No, he was not afraid because *Yahweh*, his shepherd was with him. And no one is a match for Yahweh. He's way stronger than any adversary. Besides, He loved David. And he wasn't going to let anything happen to him apart from his permission, and so there was no reason to be afraid.

David could confidently say, "I can trust Him. I can rest in Him. Because the LORD is my shepherd I'm in good hands. I have everything I need for every circumstance of life, even when I come face to face with death itself.

Years ago I read an article that was published in the Oregonian (July 25, 2004). It was about William Shatner, best known as Captain Kirk of Star Trek fame. He likes to boast that he's never been sick a day in his life, but in this interview, he confessed that he suffers from

“a dissatisfaction of the soul”, which he described as the result of coming face to face with his own mortality.

He said, “I’m so not ready to die. It petrifies me. I go alone. I go to a place I don’t know. It might be painful. It might be the end. My thought is that it *is* the end. I become nameless, and I spent a lifetime being known.”

I appreciate Mr. Shatner’s honesty, and I feel bad for him. Apparently he doesn’t know or have the good Shepherd that can guide him through the valley of the shadow of death.

Do you? That shepherd is Jesus Christ, and He has made provision for you to walk through that valley, and even experience death, without fear, because He, by His life and death and resurrection, conquered death and our fear of death. And He Himself said, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:36).*

We don’t have to be afraid of death. Yes, death still has a certain sting, because it means a temporary separation from loved ones on this earth. But death is a promotion to a much better life.

Look at the last part of **verse 4a**. *“...Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.* The rod that David is describing looked like the one I have in my possession (Massai rod), which is used by Massai for protecting their cattle from lions. Massai herdsmen have been known to kill a lion with one blow to the head with this rod. Both Massai and shepherds in David’s time kept their rods tucked in their belts so they could be easily retrieved when trouble arose.

The point is, the rod in verse 4 is a weapon, not to be used on sheep, but on predators. David says, that rod, even though it’s a weapon, comforts me, because when I see it I’m reminded that the predator has to go through my Shepherd to get to me, and I know what my Shepherd can do with that rod.

The staff on the other hand, is not only a shepherd’s walking stick, but a stick that he uses to control the flock—to get the flock to go where he wants them to go, or, if it has a crook in it, to rescue them if they are stuck in a hole or crevasse. David says that staff is a comfort to me because I know that the shepherd is going to use it to guide me where I need to go. Once again, it is David’s way of saying, because the LORD is my shepherd I’m in good hands. I have everything I need for every circumstance of life.

Verse 5. *⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.* The metaphor of a shepherd changes to that of a gracious and generous *Host*—a Host who has prepared a sumptuous banquet for an honored guest.

Those of us who live in the fast food culture can hardly appreciate this metaphor without some explanation. We’re accustomed to sticking some pre-packaged food into the microwave and scarfing it down on our way out the door. We rush through dinner so we can get on to something else.

It wasn’t that way in ancient Near Eastern culture. Dining was the high point of the day. It was an unhurried, leisurely affair in which, after a hard day’s work people came into the home and reclined at the table. And when there was a guest invited for dinner it was an event. Even before the meal there was a procedure of anointing the guest’s head with oil, which would be our equivalent to offering for him to relax in the hot tub or taking a shower before sitting down to supper. Dinner itself lasted four or five hours. And everybody just relaxed over the food. After one course was prepared and served they lingered for a while

until the next course was served.

What David is communicating in verse 5 is that Yahweh, his Host, has prepared a banquet, not merely or even primarily to satisfy his hunger, but to spend *time* with him. This is time to get to know each other, time to delight in each other, time to relax in each other's presence and enjoy fellowship with each other.

And what is remarkable is that this could happen in the presence of his enemies. David wasn't literally sitting down to a banquet with the Lord; he was probably eating his meals in haste, ever mindful that he had to scatter at a moment's notice. But even in his restless circumstances, his *soul* was at rest. Even when surrounded by the hatred of his enemies, his soul was being nourished by the love of his Lord.

David could say, because the LORD is my *host* I'm in good hands. I have everything I need for every circumstance of life.

Verse 6. *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.*

David is happily declaring that he's not just a one-time guest at the house of the Lord for a single feast. Once again, in Old Testament culture, just as in many Asian countries still today, to dine at someone's table created a bond of mutual loyalty that lasted a lifetime (Kidner, 112). That meal signified a covenant between the two parties. And so to be God's guest is to be more than an acquaintance invited for the day. It is to have a permanent relationship with Him. It is to dwell with Him.

The word "goodness" describes the steady kindness and support that one can expect to receive from close friends and family members. "Mercy" (*hesed*) is the covenant word for lovingkindness or steadfast love. Again, the emphasis is on its dependability and constancy.

And that is reinforced by the fact that David says this goodness and mercy will "chase" him all the days of his life. "Follow" is the wrong word. This word in Hebrew has the idea of a vigorous pursuit, not merely bringing up the rear. In other words, we will be hounded by God's love and kindness and goodness throughout our lives. We will never be able to escape them, no matter what our circumstances.

That's Psalm 23, probably the most familiar and dearly loved of all the psalms. Familiar and dearly loved because it contains such comfort and such hope.

I have known people who have read Psalm 23 and dismissed it as an idealistic poem written by a naïve poet who was ignorant of the complexities and challenges of real life. What they didn't know is that David wrote it while suffering from a broken heart, while running for his life from someone he had cuddled in his arms as a baby and cradled in his lap as a little boy. He wrote it while simultaneously musing on the fact that he had been rejected and betrayed by some of his closest friends—friends that were now trying to kill him.

Psalm 23 is as real life as it gets. It's a wonderful portrayal of God's provision, God's protection, and God's tender care when His loved ones are going through hell. It is a confirmation that because the LORD is my *shepherd* I'm in good hands. I have everything I need for every circumstance of life.

“In Good Hands”

Psalm 23

Main Idea: Because the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need for every circumstance of life

The provision and care of the Shepherd (1-4)

A very personal Shepherd (1a)

Attending to every need in every circumstance (1b-4)

Green pastures (2a)

Still waters (2b)

Soul restoration (3a)

Right paths (3b)

Death valley (4a)

Comforting sticks (4b)

The provision and care of the Host (5-6)

Dining in a hostile setting (5a)

Abundant libations (5b)

Pursued by God’s goodness and mercy (6a)

Dwelling in God’s house forever (6b)

Family Life Groups

Sermon Discussion Questions

Family Life Group Application Questions

“In Good Hands”—Psalm 23

Main Idea: Because the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need for every circumstance of life

1. If the LORD is our shepherd, why do we still worry or fear?
2. What are the evidences that you are lying in green pastures and beside still waters when your heart is broken or you are in great distress?
3. Why don't we need to be afraid of death? How can we help our children and loved ones who are afraid of death overcome their fear?