

626 How is the Lord our Shepherd?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

Few passages of Scripture touch the heart like Psalm 23. It is a favorite for many people, because it describes the close relationship between the psalmist David and the heavenly Father. What does David mean, "The Lord is my shepherd"? Stay tuned and we'll look at Psalm 23.

Today we're exploring how the Lord is our shepherd. David wrote that memorable psalm from his own experience as a shepherd. Psalm 23 says, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Shepherds in the ancient Near East had a difficult life. Each morning he led out his flock from the sheep fold. He did this by going before them and calling them, as is still usual in the East. Arriving at the pasture, he watched the flock closely throughout the day sometimes with the assistance of dogs (Job 30:1). If any sheep strays, he had to search for it until he found it. He supplied them with water, either at a running stream or at troughs attached to wells. She did not like to drink from moving water. They wanted "still waters." At evening he brought them back to the fold and checked to see that none was missing by passing them "under the rod" as they entered the door of the sheepfold, checking each sheep as it passed, by a motion of the hand. Finally, he watched the entrance of the fold throughout the night, acting as gatekeeper or door to the sheepfold. The shepherd's office thus required great watchfulness, particularly by night. It also required tenderness toward the young and feeble (Isaiah 40:11), particularly in driving them to and from the pasture. In large establishments there were various grades of shepherds; the highest were those "put ... in charge" or "chief shepherds" (cf. 1 Peter 5:4).

Being a shepherd, as described in the Bible, involved much hardship and even danger. He was exposed to extremes of heat and cold; his food frequently consisted of the precarious supplies afforded by nature, such as figs or the "pods" of the carob tree, pods the Prodigal Son fed to swine and longed to eat (Luke 15:16). They also may have eaten locusts and wild honey like John the Baptist. A shepherd had to face the attacks of wild beasts: occasionally lions, wolves, leopards, and bears. They also risked the threat of robbers. To meet these various foes, the shepherd's equipment consisted of the following articles: a robe, made probably of sheepskin, with the fleece on, which he turned inside out in cold weather; a pouch, containing a small amount of food; a sling, which is still the favorite weapon of the Bedouin shepherd; a rod, a short club for defense; and, last, a staff, which served the double purpose of a weapon against foes and a crook for guiding and managing the flock. If the shepherd was at a distance from his home, he usually took a light tent, which he could move easily. Often the shepherd simply slept under the stars.

When David said, "The Lord is my shepherd," he claims a relationship to the Father in heaven like a sheep has to a shepherd. Despite the fact that shepherds had to be strong and hard enough to defeat wild beasts, Isaiah 40:11 describes God as a shepherd in the kindest of terms: "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry *them* in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing *ewes*." Jesus describes the good shepherd as one who cares enough to seek out a lost sheep. In Luke 15:3-7, Jesus told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he

has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

God loves each of us and cares enough to send His Son Jesus to die in our stead so that we might have life in Christ. Though David never knew about the cross of Christ specifically, he knew that the Father loved him enough to take care of him. The Father was his shepherd, so David could say, "I shall not want," that is, "I have no needs." The Lord makes him to lie down in green pastures. Sheep would only lie down when they were well-fed, well-watered and felt secure. David knew that the Father would not only provide but would also protect him. He felt secure with God. The Father would also lead him beside still waters to drink. Sheep did not like to drink from running or disturbed waters. This is why the shepherd often went to wells and poured their water into troughs. Green grass and still water made a sheep feel secure. My friend, the Lord can also give you the peace that passes understanding. Paul said in Philippians 4:6-7, "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The Lord leads us in the paths of righteousness for his own name's sake. Shepherds used their voices to call and lead sheep, but sheep like people often went astray. They had the tendency to go their own way. So the shepherd carried his long staff to gently correct the sheep. They would tap them on their sides to turn them into the path they wanted them to go. Occasionally they would have to give the sheep a little harder tap on the back of the head to get their attention. Shepherds loved the sheep enough to correct them when they needed it. I would rather suffer a little rap on the head today than to continue to ignore the Great Shepherd of heaven and lose my soul. People who ignore sin and are unwilling to speak out against it may seem for the moment kind; but God loves us enough to correct us when we need it. David said, "He restores my soul." God's providence, his protection, and his correction are what keep me on the right path to heaven. God restores me to the right path when I need it. He keeps me from the evil around me and helps me to keep focus on the way to life, not rebellion and death.

"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." Not long ago I visited the City of David, Bethlehem. I saw all the hills and valleys in that area. I saw the hills with grassy mounds just right for feeding sheep. And between those hills were steep valleys that had to be crossed to get to more green grass that the sheep needed. It was on those trips through the valleys that the wild beasts often lurked, hiding and hoping to get a meal from the flock. The shepherd would have to pay special attention during those trips to get to the other side. He had his rod, a short club, under his belt. He used that rod to beat off the wolves, lions or bears. It often had a nail sticking through it to give it greater power. Sheep didn't worry about going through a valley as long as the shepherd was there. They knew that everything would be all right. Hillsides and valleys often had hidden caves and holes in them. The shepherd needed his staff with the crook in the end to be able to lift a sheep up from a precarious place. Sheep didn't have to be anxious as long as the shepherd was there to protect them through the valleys. The shepherd, his rod, and his staff were indeed a comfort.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” You can imagine the sheep and goats feeding on a hillside with predators lurking out in the distance, watching for an opportunity to strike the sheep. Having a shepherd made all the difference. The shepherd was there to protect them from the life-threatening predators. How different this is from the situation Jesus describes. He speaks of the condition of sheep who have no shepherd. Mt. 9:36-38 says, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Flocks without a shepherd are troubled by predators, physically torn up and helpless. You could see the discouragement and distress. That is the way it is in this life, when people live their lives without the Lord. They get torn up by the Devil and are discouraged and distressed. They lack hope and are helpless. My friend, we need the Lord as our shepherd!

“You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.” Shepherds carried some olive oil with them in their bags for medicinal uses. If a sheep began to run a fever, the shepherd would put a little oil on their foreheads to comfort them. If the flies and insects began to trouble the sheep, shepherds would use a little olive oil around their eyes and face to protect and comfort them. You see, the shepherd cared not only for the big problems of the sheep, he also cared for the little problems. He was there to protect, provide, and to care for the sheep against every problem. Peter pointed to Jesus and said, “casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7). No problem is too big or too small to take to the Lord. He cares about us, even in the little matters. This is just one little thing that makes us understand that our cup overflows. Jesus said in John 10:10 that he came to give us an abundant life, a life that is so full it overflows. David knew how great his blessings were! We as Christians need to know that our blessings in Christ are even greater. Our cup truly overflows in God’s grace and love and truth.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” The favor of God is such a wonderful thing. God fulfills our needs in this life and prepares a place for us in the next life. When we have a positive relationship with God, God will always act for our best interests. His goodness and mercy follows us. Wherever we go, whatever we do, God is there to shower us with His love and grace. And even when that time comes for us to leave this world, God has made preparation. I treasure the words of Jesus in John 14:1-3, “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also.”

I don’t know about you, but I am so thankful to be a Christian and to have the overflowing cup of God in my life. Many years ago I

attended a lectureship where an esteemed Bible teacher was retiring and being given a lifetime achievement award. In thanking the school for the award, he spoke of how blessed he was all his life as a Bible teacher. He concluded his remarks with the words: “All this, and heaven too.” I was touched by that remark, “All this, and heaven too.” God’s goodness and mercy are not temporary but last for an eternity. This is why being a Christian is so very important. I hope you will become one by believing with all your heart that Jesus is the Christ. Because you love Him, I pray that you will turn from every sin. Leave that old life behind and follow the path of righteousness for His name’s sake. Confess His name before everyone. Then I pray you’ll be baptized (immersed) in water for the forgiveness of your sins. When you are baptized the Lord adds you to His church, His family, and counts you as one of His own. That’s just the beginning of an overflowing cup. He begins blessing you in the new birth of baptism, and you get to live in the house of the Lord forever. Some people overlook what God does in baptism. I hope you won’t. It is in baptism that God saves us (Titus 3:5). He takes us out of that distressed and downcast group without a shepherd and puts us into the kingdom of His beloved Son (Col. 1:13-14). We don’t have to live lives filled with helplessness and hopelessness. We can embrace the Lord by obeying the gospel. The best day to obey the gospel is today. The best day to make the Lord your shepherd is today. The best day to be saved is today. My friend, Christianity is “All this, and heaven too!”

Jesus is the good shepherd (John 10:12), the great shepherd (Heb. 13:20), the chief shepherd (1 Pet 5:4), and the one shepherd (John 10:16). Now, He is a shepherd whether you acknowledge Him or not. David said the Lord is “my” shepherd; is He yours? You remember the picture Jesus gave of the sheep without a shepherd? This scene takes place in Galilee among the Jews, who went to the synagogue every Sabbath. A lot of people are religious but aren’t really close to God. Their religion is more one of “tradition” than of connection with God Himself. What David described in Psalm 23 was a close and loving relationship with a God who cared about him. I fear that many today have a church but not a relationship with the Lord. They know about their church, but they don’t know God. Jesus spoke about some of the Jews of his days in these words, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” True religion honors the Lord with both the lips and the life. It listens to the commandments of God rather than following its own paths. It always asks the question, “What does God desire?” It listens to God, because only God, as our shepherd, has the words of life. The way to know God is to study His word, to follow in His paths rather than trying to have a self-made religion. You won’t find the green pastures or the still waters by straying from the Shepherd of our souls. Turn to Him, give yourself to Him, live for Him, and you’ll find how wonderful a shepherd God truly is. My friend, become a Christian.

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