

Psalm 23

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[0 : 00] It is a great joy to be with you tonight to open God's word. Cory mentioned that our church in Mississippi had very generously given our family a summer sabbatical and so we've been here with you and your beautiful city in this church the last few weeks.

And Cory mentioned and joked that he asked me to preach on sabbatical. I brought my wife and three children to his home about a week after his fifth child was born and so it's the least that I can do with twelve in their house as well as a cat and so we're enjoying life with the Brocks but it is a pleasure to be with you, a joy to be with you.

Keep Psalm 23 open before you and just something to help orient us to the text, a story, an old story about a man named Robert Robinson and he was boarding a carriage in London and he was hoping to be riding alone but across the aisle from him was a young woman who was carrying in her hands a breviary, a small book of hymns and prayers and poems and a few moments after he sat down she tossed the breviary to him and she said, sir you must read this and he opened it and he read these words, the words come now found of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace and his face sank and this woman noticed a change in his countenance and she said, sir have you read these words and he said, miss I wrote those words more than twenty five years ago and he said I would give a thousand worlds, I would give a thousand worlds to feel today what I felt back then.

I would give a thousand worlds to feel today what I felt back then. Maybe you are here this evening and like Robert Robinson it's been a long time for you and you are busy and your heart is busy that sometimes you can wake up and you can think how did I get here, how did I get so far, how did I get so far from the heart of God, how did I get in this funk and when we come to text like Psalm 23 there are these grand and glorious promises for us here, these familiar words to us and maybe for you like me the question is how can these grand and glorious promises get from my head back down into my heart.

I would give a thousand worlds to feel today what I felt back then, how can these words get from my head down into my heart or maybe we can put it like this, it's one thing to be told Jesus loves you or it's one thing to be told Jesus is my good shepherd.

[3 : 09] It is quite another thing for our hearts to experience that, to draw down on it for it to change our lives.

And so for those who are prone to say I would give a thousand worlds, for those who are asking is there good news for me from Psalm 23 tonight.

I want to give our attention for a few moments to this Psalm that Charles Spurgeon called the Pearl. This is the Psalm, y'all are in a study this summer, a summer in the Psalms here at St. C's on Sunday nights and this is the Psalm that Charles Spurgeon called the Pearl of the Psalms. It's long before Michael Jordan and long before LeBron James and long before David Beckham, they're all number 23.

Long before them David had his own number 23. And so this is a Psalm that may be for you as the most beloved passage in the Bible. It might be a text that you remember maybe cross stitched at a grandparents house when you were a child.

[4 : 22] It could be a text that was read at the deathbed of someone that was precious to you or at the funeral of a beloved family member.

Whatever ways that God has used this text in your life, it is a text that can come with it just a flood of memories. And this Psalm, if you look with me in the text, the Psalm is known really for one image. There's one image, one governing image and illustration that this Psalm is known for. But we're going to look at these two interlocking images, these two interlocking illustrations here in Psalm 23.

And so first the most famous in verses one to four, if you look at the text, the governing image, the governing illustration of this Psalm that the Lord is my shepherd, the good shepherd, and that we are a sheep in his care as Christians.

But there's a second image that we're going to give some attention to that we see in verses five and six. And that is that Jesus is also our generous host, that he's not only our good shepherd, that he's also our generous host, that he's a host to us in hospitality, and he invites us to his table.

[5 : 43] And so we're going to look tonight at these two images, the good shepherd. This Psalm is often called the shepherd's Psalm. So the good shepherd in verses one to four, that we are a sheep in his care.

And then second, the generous host in verses five and six, that we have a seat at his table, that we can slide our knees up under his table.

And so first the good shepherd. Look with me at verse one, the banner verse, the most well-known verse in the Psalm, the Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd. Let's put it like this, and Corey referenced this in the children's devotional. On a job application, sometimes you're asked this really annoying question, what animal?

Like what animal do you identify with, or what animal best personifies you, or your personality?

[6 : 47] And we can put it like this, that in the history of job applications, no one ever answered that question and said a sheep. No one ever answered a sheep.

And that's because sheep are not the brightest, they're not the bravest. They're always weak, they're always vulnerable. They're always needy.

And yet time and again in the scriptures, this is the image. Time and again, this is the image that God uses to say, this is us.

And the more that you grow as a Christian, the more your eyes are opened, the more you see yourself clearly, you can say, yes, I am weak.

Yes I am vulnerable. Yes I am not the brightest, not the bravest, always needy.

[7 : 45] You see yourself clearly, and you see the best thing. The best thing about being a sheep is that you have a shepherd. If you look at verse one, Charles Spurgeon said that he thought the sweetest verse in Psalm 23 is in verse one, and it's the word my.

The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd. And so you see the Lord in all caps. So Yahweh, the covenant God, the faithful God, Yahweh is my shepherd.

He has stooped to serve in this low position. In the shepherd's job, Yahweh's job is to be with the sheep, tending them and teaching them and keeping them and defending them.

And so let me ask you, do you see God saying this to you tonight about Jesus, your good shepherd? That if you are weak and wounded, if you are bruised and broken, if you are sick and sore, if you have regrets, if you have shame, if you have a checkered past, if you think often I'm not faithful enough, or I'm not put together enough, or I'm not attractive enough, or I'm not faithful enough.

Do you see, I want you to hear that you are Jesus's type. The Lord is my shepherd, meaning that you are Jesus's type.

[9 : 29] We're just saying that He is the God who welcomes the weakest, that He is for the faintly burning wicks of the world, that He is for those with empty chairs, that He's for the widow, that He's for the orphan, He is a man for the lowly, He's a servant king, He's a low man himself, and He won't come into this world and break you.

The Lord is my shepherd. He won't come into this world and break the wounded, and He won't come into this world and break the fragile. So much so that look at the text in His shepherding care that we can say, I shall not want, that He welcomes the wounded.

He welcomes the weakest so that we can say, the Lord shepherds me in such a way that I lack nothing. And you see in the first three verses of the Psalm that there are all sorts of benefits of belonging to Him.

There's all sorts of benefits of His shepherding care, of Him being active in your life. And so notice His activity that we read that He makes, He makes me lie down, He leads, and that He restores my soul.

We read again in verse 3 that He leads me. He's with me, He prepares for me, and that He anoints me. And so we can say that the Lord as your shepherd, that He's active, that He's active in your life.

[11 : 05] And there's all sorts of benefits that we can flesh out, but just for time's sake, a few of them, we can say as we think about John chapter 10 in the New Testament, we can say that Jesus is the good shepherd who knows His sheep.

So He knows you. Jesus says in John chapter 10, I am the good shepherd. I know my own. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and I know them by name.

I've got three children I mentioned. When my wife was pregnant a few years back with our third child, we were really kind of days away from going to the hospital without a name.

That wasn't the case with our first two, but with our third one, we were very last minute. And I remember in the days leading up to the birth of our third child, having a conversation with our older children about what was the name going to be.

And they gave all sorts of advice, which we did not go with. But I remember after that conversation, my wife left the room and my oldest asked me this question.

[12 : 20] He said, Dad, will you always remember my name? Will you always remember my name? And I said, Buddy, I will always remember your name.

I will always remember your name. And I thought that'll be a sermon illustration one day. I'll always remember your name. Well, Jesus is the good shepherd who knows you.

You're comprehensively known by your shepherd. You're comprehensively loved by your shepherd that He knows you. He knows everything about you. He knows how frightened you are.

He knows your particular needs. And so because He knows you, that you can say in His providence that you do not lack, that in His guidance in your life that you will not lack rest and that you will not lack restoration, that you can say, I lie down in green pastures because He knows how to take care of me.

And then you see this other benefit that He leads you in His good governing of your life, that you will be led beside still waters, that you will not lack guidance.

[13 : 31] He guides you down just the right paths as you are in His shepherding care. But then this third benefit, verse 4, He knows you. He leads you.

And then in verse 4, look at verse 4, I will walk through the valley of the shadow of death that He is the good shepherd who defends you.

He defends His sheep. And so He defends you from those things that threaten you when you are in that most dark place, when you're in that deep valley of your life that He is the good shepherd who defends you.

And even in those moments when you're prone to leave, when you're prone to wander off, Luke 15 says that He's the good shepherd who leaves the 99 and goes after you.

He leaves the 99 and goes after the one. Don't we need that? That He is the good shepherd who leaves the 99. And the text says that when He finds you, He lays you on His shoulder rejoicing, that He's rejoicing.

[14 : 39] And so He's protecting you even if He has to prod you, even if He has to guide you to keep you from wandering off, that He is the good shepherd who knows you and He leads you and He defends you.

But I want you to think about this. There's no... Many have made note of this with this psalm.

There's no plea in this psalm. This is a psalm without a request.

There's no request in Psalm 23. Psalm 23 is actually... It's a story. It's a journey. That Psalm 23 is real life.

That Psalm 23, it's a journey. And you see, it's filled with temptations and trials in verse 4, but it's a journey. You look in verse 5, it's a journey to the banquet table.

It's a journey to the feast table of God, the wedding supper of the lamb. And so He takes you through verse 4, through the danger, through the desert valley, to the feast table of God.

[15 : 47] But I think the psalm is driving towards this benefit as we go on this journey through all of the trials and all of the temptations and all of the traps, the benefit that He is with you.

Because you see in the first three verses, I love this. You see that David is talking about the Lord.

And then when he gets in verse 4, when he gets to that most dark place, notice the pronoun.

David's no longer talking about the Lord as his shepherd, but when he gets to the dark place in verse 4, when he gets to the deepest, darkest valley, you notice that he says, not I will fear no evil for in that place, for the Lord is with me, but he says what?

What does the text say? For you are with me. And so you see one of the highlights, one of the benefits, one of the greatest benefits of being in Jesus' shepherding care is that he has always been near to his people.

He's near to you. The burning bush, the pillar of fire, the tabernacle, God with us, Emmanuel, one of the highlights of his shepherding care has always been his nearness.

[17:12] And so you see that David is content in that, that David has confidence in that, regardless of the circumstances of his life, that David clings to the nearness of the Lord.

There's a story of a little boy who was ill and he was desperately ill. And so the parents called their pastor who came to their home one night.

And the pastor went to the boy's room, just he and the boy. And he read scripture with the boy. He prayed with the boy. He assured him of the promises of the gospel.

And the pastor went home and later that night the boy died. And so the parents called the pastor back the next morning. And the pastor went and he tried to comfort the parents with the promises of the gospel.

And the parents asked the pastor this question. They said, when our son died, he was holding onto his ring finger. And he started to do that after you left.

[18:18] Can you explain that to us? And the pastor said, well, as you know, when I went to see your son, he was barely conscious. He was barely able to talk.

And I was trying to give him comfort in the faithfulness of God, in the good news of the gospel, that he is in God's grip.

And so I began to grab his fingers and I would say, starting with his thumb, the Lord is my shepherd.

And the boy started doing that over and over again as I was still in the room with him. And then I left. And so you see this boy barely conscious in the last moments of his life that he is reminding his heart that he is safe and secure, that he is gripped by, that he's kept by the shepherd who was with him.

Do we sense tonight the nearness of our good shepherd who promises to be near? If your family is hanging together by a thread that God is not far off from you, that if you struggle with despair or depression, if you struggle with a disease that is sucking the life out of you, or sucking the life out of people that you love, that God promises to be near.

[19:44] If there is dementia, if there is infertility, if there is Parkinson's, if there is chemo, that God is not distant in that, that he is the good shepherd who is near to his people.

As one commentator said, the darker the shadow, the closer the Lord. The darker the shadow, the closer the Lord. And so don't you know that there is a battle tonight, that there is a battle on the turf of your heart to believe that the Lord is your shepherd, and to be content in his shepherding care in your life, to be content for contentment with your life and with your story.

That you and I, that we are all prone to look to idle shepherds, that money or the approval are my achievements and my accomplishments, that work is going to shepherd me in these ways.

But there is this battle to look to Jesus as our shepherd, to have contentment in his shepherding care and joy in his shepherding care. There's a quote that I love to think about from time to time from the author of Winnie the Pooh and he writes about Piglet and he says that he had a very small heart but such a large capacity for gratitude.

That he had a very small heart but such a large capacity for gratitude. Can anyone say that about you? That you have gratitude, that you have such a large capacity for gratitude with the life that the Lord has given you.

[21:28] With his shepherding care in your life, that every so often I wake up out of my slumber and I am amazed between my receivings on the one hand and my deserving on the other.

As one pastor said, such a crown for such an ungrateful person, that I am amazed between my receivings and my deserving.

If you look at your life and you feel yourself lacking, this line, I lack nothing in his care. This challenges us. This challenges the person here who feels himself or herself lacking in their story because we are conditioned.

We're conditioned that contentment is found, that joy is found, that gratitude is found in some other shepherding care.

In the care of money or in the care of work or in the care of achievement in this life. But those things will break your heart and contentment, contentment, contentment, contentment will not be found by your striving for those things.

[22 : 47] It cannot be found by getting what you want. It can only be found by being grateful for what the Lord has given you. So you see Psalm 23, that you are in the hands of your good shepherd.

Only this good news, only the good news of the gospel. Only this can give you a narrative that will compel you to stop striving, that will compel you to stop striving.

And so let me ask you, where is that sense of already loved, already worthy, lacking nothing that you can say these words in Psalm 23, that he makes me lie down in green pastures, that I shall not want, that he restores my soul.

Your accomplishments will not give you those things and your money will not give you those things. It has to come from a voice outside of you.

And so what is going to pronounce? What voice is going to pronounce over you already loved, already worthy?

[23 : 56] You know, there was a golf tournament a few years ago. I feel like as the American pastor that comes here, I've picked Psalm 23, I'm going to use a sermon illustration about golf.

But there was a golf tournament, the 150th British Open at the course at St. Andrew's that was highly anticipated and a lot of us Americans at least were pulling for Tiger Woods to come and to play well.

And Tiger at the time was 46. He was coming off of a car accident that had severely damaged his leg. And Tiger played mediocre at best and he wasn't going to make the cut.

And as he's walking the 18th green at the course at St. Andrew's that Friday, after mediocre golf, there's a standing ovation for him.

And Tiger, you can see that in that moment, he begins to cry. And one of the analysts say that they think that in that moment, one of the analysts live on that broadcast said they think in that moment that Tiger Woods realized that he was beloved, that he didn't have to do anything exceptional for people to love him and that brought him to tears.

[25 : 15] And so the question for us is what if we lived out of that posture already loved already worthy? What if you lived in that certainty? You see the gospel gives you a bigger story and a better story than what your idol shepherds could ever promise you.

And that's where you live, Christian, a place of fullness, a place of fullness with the story that the Lord has given you, not deprivation, not lacking but rich, that you can sing yet how rich is my condition.

God in heaven are still my own. You see he had a very small heart, remember, but such a large capacity for gratitude. And so let me ask you, do you see yourself as a sheep tonight?

A weak, vulnerable, needy? Do you see yourself clearly? And what shepherds are you looking to? What shepherds are you running to, to take care of you in this life?

Jesus is the good shepherd that you need, that you are a sheep in his care and that he has been abundantly generous to you with his grace, with his good news.

[26 : 28] And so secondly and briefly and lastly, let's consider the generous host that you have a seated his table in verses five and six. And so the shepherd has carried you, remember, through verse two, through the green pastures, he's carried you through the valley of the shadow of death, verse four, and then he's carried you to the feasting in verse five.

So David replaces the shepherding imagery. He describes a relationship now that's actually more intimate. No longer he's not talking about shepherds and sheep, but he's talking about friends around the table, companions around the table, and he gives us a picture of welcome.

And he gives us this picture of celebration and this picture of joy. One commentator points out that to eat and drink at someone's table could be the culminating token of a covenant.

And so to be God's guest, he said, is to be more than an acquaintance invited for a day, but it is to live with him. And so Psalm 23 is this journey and it's this journey home.

And so you see in verses five and six, Christian, this is where you're headed. This is where your story is headed. And God is the great host invites you to his table to commune with him.

[27 : 50] And you notice in verse five that he anoints my head with oil, my cup overflows. This picture of oil and wine, this overflowing joy of the communion that you have with God, this sign of

welcome that he has rolled out the red carpet, that you are welcomed at his table, that you're honored at his table, that you will be full in his presence.

So we wonder, don't we, about this phrase that you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. And I think this may be my favorite part of the Psalm.

I think the Psalmist is saying, think of the things that are foes in your life. Think of the enemies of your life. And surely David could have been talking about individuals, but think more about the internal foes.

What Paul writes about in Romans, the good that I want to do, I don't do. I do the very thing that I don't want to do, that battle that takes place inside of you that our confession talks about it as the irreconcilable war, the Westminster Confession, the irreconcilable war that takes place in the life of the Christian.

Think about those foes, and when you're at the banquet table of God, when you're at the feast table of God, those internal foes will be silent.

[29 : 26] There will be freedom for you, Christian. There will be a freedom unlike you've ever known. And so not only is there a welcome, not only is there celebration, but there is freedom here.

There's freedom at this table. And so I want you to imagine this is where you're headed. This is where your story is headed. Verse 5, you and I have a certain future that we will be seated at the feast table of God with the resurrected Jesus.

But the scary part for our lives and in our stories is verse 4. The scary part is to get to verse 5 that we have to go through verse 4.

And so the question here as well in this second image, what do we do? What is going to sustain us? And again, just like in the first image, the Lord is with us.

Because look at verse 6, surely goodness and mercy, these famous lines, surely goodness and mercy, the unbreaking always and forever love of God, His hested love, surely goodness and His hested love will follow me all the days of my life.

[30 : 41] One Old Testament scholar put it like this, that His goodness and mercy pursue us. They run after you and me that wherever you may find yourself to be, the mountaintop or the deepest, darkest valley, you know that His goodness and His mercy are relentlessly chasing after you.

And so I want you to notice as we wrap up, I want you to notice the imagery in the Psalm. Because for the Christian, what is behind you?

For the Christian, what is behind you? You see verse 6 that He is relentlessly pursuing me with His goodness and His hested love.

Well, what is in front of me? What's in front of you, Christian? You see in verse 3 that He leads me in passive righteousness.

And so behind me is His goodness and His hested love. In front of me is His leading me, His good providence in my life.

[31 : 45] Well, what about when I am in that most dark place? What about when I'm in that deep, dark valley? What does verse 4 say? That you are with me.

For you are with me is what the Psalmist says. And so for the Christian that you are wrapped up on every side, that you are hemmed in, that He is before you and He is behind you and He is beside you.

And so when Jesus grips you with His shepherding love, it is a love that will not let you go all the days of your life. And that nothing, not death, not sin, not even time, can stop His love.

It is an everlasting love. As Ralph Davis said, it's a love with no expiration date. And so let me close with this.

I had a friend, this story, a friend that recently directed me to the Story Corps, which is a nonprofit organization that shares stories of compassion and love.

[32 : 49] And some time ago they had a segment where a mother is interviewing her adult son. And her adult son's name is Josh, and he's a 23-year-old with Down syndrome.

And the mother asked Josh this question. She said, Josh, did you have any dreams about what you wanted to become when you grew up?

And Josh replied and said, yes, I had lots of them. And he said, I dreamed, and this was an amazing combination. He said, I dreamed that I would be a pastor and a WWE professional wrestler, this combination that Corey's, I think Corey's going from, the Corey's going for.

And of course then there's this silence in the interview because Josh hadn't become those things. And Josh said that he wanted to be those things to make his parents proud. And so the mother then followed that up with this question. She said, Josh, do you think that we are proud of you? And he said, absolutely, I know that you're proud.

[33 : 57] And he said, because you love me with an everlasting love. You love me with an everlasting love. And then the mother, she said, Josh, do you remember this thing that we used to do?

And she said to him, you are my Josh. And then he said back to her, you are my mom. And they went back and forth. And he said, you are my Josh, you are my mom, you are my Josh, you are my mom.

And it was this amazing moment. And there is so much beautiful in that story. And there is so much that is beautiful as Josh is able to hang on to his mother's love for him, which brings us really back to where we began.

That it is one thing to be told, Jesus loves me. It's another thing to experience it. It is another thing to draw down on it and for it to change your life.

Well, Christian, when your shepherd grips you with his love, it is a love that will not let you go. And so you can say today that as you leave here, you can say that his goodness and his mercy are pursuing me.

[35 : 08] And that he leads me in paths of righteousness, that he is guiding me in this life. And that in the dark place that he is with me, that he is right beside me, that we are totally hemmed in the Lord's care.

Isaiah chapter 40 verse 11, he will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom and he will gently lead those that are with young.

That's an invitation. Let me pray for us. Our God of all grace, we thank you for time together under your word. We pray that you would come and give it success in our hearts.

We pray that we confess that we are weak and frail sheep. We thank you that you are the one who has come to seek and save the lost, who has left the 99 to come after the one to come after us.

And so come after our hearts again tonight and we pray all of this in Jesus' name. Amen.