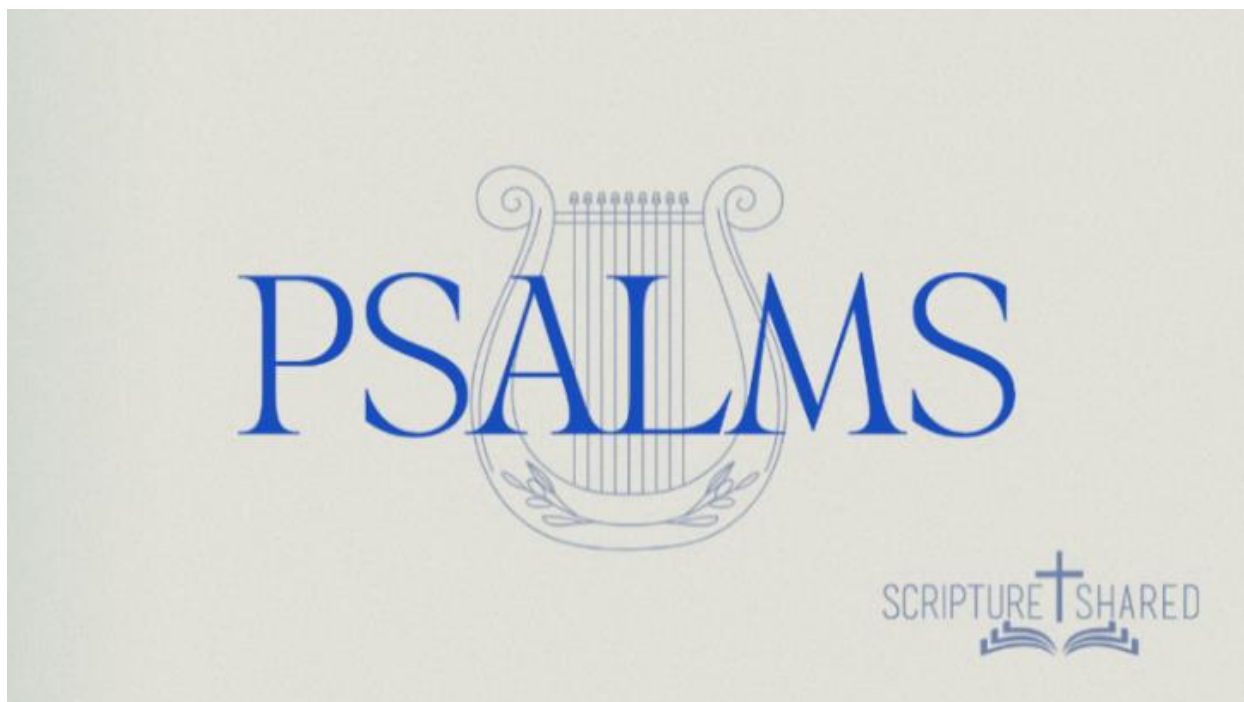




## Week 6

### Week 6, Day 1

#### **Psalm 23:1**

*<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

#### **Understanding the Passage:**

To really understand what David is saying here, we need to understand what shepherding looked like in ancient Israel. Shepherding wasn't a prestigious job. It was dirty, dangerous work that required complete devotion. Shepherds lived with their flocks, sleeping outside to protect them from predators. They knew each sheep individually – their quirks, their weaknesses, their tendencies to wander. When a sheep went missing, a good shepherd would leave the ninety-nine to search for the one that was lost (remember Luke 15?!). The shepherd's life revolved entirely around the welfare of the sheep.

When David says, "The Lord is *my* shepherd," he's making it personal. Not just a shepherd – *my* shepherd. Not the shepherd of Israel in some abstract, corporate sense, but the one who knows David individually, who watches over him specifically, who seeks him out when he wanders.

The second part of this verse – "I shall not want" – doesn't mean we won't desire anything. The Hebrew word **chaser** means to lack something necessary, to be in need. David is saying that with God as his shepherd, he will lack nothing *essential*. Not that he'll have everything he wants, but that he'll have everything he needs.

This is countercultural. We live in a world that constantly tells us we lack something. We need the new phone, the bigger house, the better job, the perfect relationship. Advertising exists to create a

sense of want in us. Social media feeds our comparison and makes us feel like we're missing out. But David flips that script entirely. When God is our shepherd, we have enough. We *are* enough.

It's worth noting what David doesn't say. He doesn't say "The Lord is my CEO" or "The Lord is my life coach." He uses the image of a shepherd – someone who leads, provides, protects, and cares. This tells us something important about God's character and about what we need most. We don't need a boss who maximizes our productivity. We need a shepherd who knows us, loves us, and ensures we have what we truly need.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. What do you find yourself "wanting" that you don't actually need? How does believing God is your shepherd change your relationship with those desires?
2. When you think about God knowing you as individually as a shepherd knows each sheep, what emotions does that stir up?
3. In what areas of your life do you struggle to believe you have "enough"? What would it look like to trust that God has provided what you need?

## **Week 6, Day 2**

### **Psalm 23:2-3a**

<sup>2</sup> *He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;*

<sup>3a</sup> *he restores my soul.*

### **Understanding the Passage:**

W. Phillip Keller, who was raised as the son of missionaries in Africa, and later became a shepherd in both Canada and Kenya, wrote a classic book called *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. In it, he uses his shepherding experience to help folks really understand the nuances of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. He talks about sheep being notoriously anxious creatures who won't lie down if they feel threatened, if they're hungry, if there's conflict in the flock, or if they're bothered by insects. For sheep to rest, everything has to be right.

So, when David says God "makes me lie down in green pastures," he's describing a state of complete peace and security. The shepherd has done everything necessary to create an environment where rest is possible.

The Hebrew word for "makes me lie down" is *rabats*, which can also mean "to settle down" or "to dwell." It's not a forceful action but a gentle leading into a place of rest. God isn't throwing us to the ground and demanding we relax. Instead, God creates the conditions – the safety, the provision, the peace – that make rest possible.

Green pastures in the Middle Eastern wilderness weren't (and still aren't) common. The land is rocky and brown for the majority of the year. A shepherd had to know where to find those rare patches of good grazing land. Similarly, God knows where we need to be led to find nourishment and rest, even when the landscape of our lives feels barren.

The image shifts from pasture to water... but notice the kind of water. Not rushing rivers or crashing waves, but "still waters." The Hebrew word *menukhot* means "waters of rest" or "quiet waters." Keller also notes in his book that sheep are afraid of fast-moving water and won't drink from it. They need calm, still water to feel safe enough to drink.

How often do we find ourselves beside turbulent waters in our lives? Chaos at work, conflict in relationships, anxiety about the future. But God leads us to still waters: places of calm where we can be refreshed without fear. Sometimes this means God changes our circumstances. More often, it means that God changes *us* in the midst of unchanged circumstances, creating an inner stillness even when everything around us is in motion.

And then comes the result: "he restores my soul." The Hebrew word *shuv* (שׁוּב) means to turn back, to return, to restore to an original condition. When we're exhausted, depleted, running on empty, God brings us back to ourselves. Back to who we were created to be. Back to a place of wholeness.

This restoration isn't something we can manufacture for ourselves. We can't self-care our way into soul restoration, as helpful as those practices might be. True restoration, the kind that reaches down to our souls, comes from the shepherd who leads us to the right places and creates the conditions for healing.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What prevents you from "lying down" and resting? What anxieties or circumstances keep you from experiencing peace?
2. Where are the "still waters" in your life right now – the places where you can be refreshed without fear?
3. When you think about your soul being "restored," what would that look like? What parts of yourself feel like they need to be brought back to wholeness?

## Week 6, Day 3

### Psalm 23:3b

*<sup>3b</sup> He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

### Understanding the Passage:

David's understanding of right paths isn't about moral perfection or being a "good person" in the way we often think about it. The Hebrew word used here – *tsedek* – means rightness, justice, what is straight and true. These are paths that lead somewhere good, paths that are aligned with God's character and purposes.

Notice that God *leads* us in these paths. The Hebrew word *nachah* means to guide or conduct. A shepherd doesn't drive sheep from behind with a stick (that's for cattle). A shepherd walks ahead and the sheep follow. God goes before us, showing us the way, and invites us to follow.

What really stands out in this verse is that God leads us in right paths "for his name's sake." Not primarily for our sake, though we certainly benefit. God guides us rightly because God's reputation is at stake. God's name – God's character, God's identity – is tied up with how God cares for us.

In Keller's book, he asserts that a shepherd's reputation in the ancient Near East depended entirely on the health of the flock. If the sheep were scrawny, diseased, or constantly getting lost, everyone would know the shepherd wasn't doing their job. But if the sheep were healthy and well-cared for, it reflected well on the shepherd's skill and faithfulness.

When God leads us in right paths, it's because God's glory is connected to our flourishing. God doesn't just save us and then walk away. God continues to guide us, not out of obligation or duty, but because our well-being reflects on who God is. We are walking testimonies to God's faithfulness.

This should bring us comfort when we feel lost or uncertain about which way to go. God has a vested interest in getting us where we need to be. Not because we've earned it or deserve it, but because God's own name is tied to our journey. God's reputation as a good shepherd depends on leading the sheep well.

It also challenges us. Are we following? Or are we constantly wandering off, insisting on our own paths, convinced we know better than our shepherd? The promise is that God will lead us in right paths... but we have to be willing to follow.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Think about a time when you insisted on going your own way instead of following God's leading. How did that go?
2. How does knowing that God's reputation is tied to your well-being change the way you think about God's involvement in your life?
3. What does it mean practically, in your daily life, to let God lead you in "right paths"? What would following look like today?

## Week 6, Day 4

### Psalm 23:4

*<sup>4</sup> 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.*

### Understanding the Passage:

In this verse, David is talking about the scariest, most dangerous place one can go. The valleys in between the hills in the Judean wilderness were often referred to as the valley of the shadow of death because they were treacherous, narrow passages where predators could hide, where bandits might attack, where a single misstep could be fatal.

But here's what David *doesn't* say: "I will avoid the valley." He doesn't say, "God will keep me from ever walking through dark places." Instead, he says, "*even though* I walk through the darkest valley." The assumption is that we *will* go through these valleys. Suffering, loss, fear, and grief are not signs that God has abandoned us or that we've done something wrong. They're part of the human experience.

David's confidence in the valley isn't based on the absence of danger. He doesn't say, "I fear no evil because there is no evil." He fears no evil *because God is with him*. It's the presence of the shepherd, not the absence of threats, that gives him courage.

The keyword here is *through*. Not *into*. Not *stuck in*. *Through*. Valleys have two sides. When you're walking through a valley, you're going somewhere. You're not staying there. This isn't your permanent address; it's a passage you're moving through with the shepherd leading the way.

And then David mentions the shepherd's tools: the rod and the staff. The rod was a club used for protection – to fight off predators and defend the sheep. The staff was a long crook used for

guidance – to pull a sheep back from danger or to help them navigate difficult terrain. Both the rod and the staff are about the shepherd's active involvement. God doesn't just watch from a distance. God fights for us. God guides us. God intervenes.

It is interesting that David says these tools *comfort* him. Most of us don't find discipline or guidance particularly comforting in the moment. We tend to prefer being left alone to do our own thing. But David has learned that the shepherd's correction and direction are actually sources of comfort because they keep him safe and on the right path.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What "valley" are you walking through right now? How does it change your perspective to think of it as something you're moving *through* rather than stuck in?
2. When have you experienced God's presence in a dark time? How did that presence change your fear?
3. Can you think of a time when God's "rod" or "staff" (correction or guidance) was actually a source of comfort, even if it didn't feel that way initially?

## Week 6, Day 5

### Psalm 23:5-6

<sup>5</sup> *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

<sup>6</sup> *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.*

### Understanding the Passage:

The imagery shifts dramatically here. We've moved from shepherding to hosting, from pastures to a banquet table. But the core truth remains the same: God provides, God protects, God is present.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." God doesn't wait until all our problems are resolved, until all our enemies are vanquished, until everything is perfect. God sets a feast *while the threats are still present*. The enemies are right there, watching, and yet we're invited to sit down and eat in peace and safety. This is not about God ignoring our struggles or pretending they don't exist. It's about God's provision being so abundant and God's protection being so complete that we can rest and feast even when danger surrounds us. We don't have to wait for perfect circumstances to experience God's goodness.

In ancient Middle Eastern culture, to anoint someone's head with oil was to honor them as a guest. It was a sign of celebration, of welcome, of favor. Olive oil was precious and expensive so using it for anointing wasn't a casual gesture. When God anoints our heads with oil, it's a declaration of our worth, our belovedness, our status as honored guests at God's table.

"My cup overflows" speaks to abundance beyond measure. Not just enough, but more than enough. Not just provision, but generosity. God doesn't give us the bare minimum we need to survive. God gives us the abundance of an overflowing cup.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." The Hebrew word for "follow" is *radaph*, which actually means to pursue or chase. Goodness and mercy aren't just trailing behind us passively. They're actively pursuing us, chasing us down, following us relentlessly. We can't

outrun God's goodness. We can't escape God's mercy – and this is mercy that doesn't give up, doesn't walk away, doesn't depend on our performance. It's God's committed, pursuing love that follows us every single day.

David ends where he began—with a declaration of relationship. "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." The word "dwell" in Hebrew is *yashab*, meaning to sit down, to remain, to settle. This isn't about a physical building. It's about living in God's presence, remaining in relationship with God, making our home with the shepherd who has led us through every valley and provided for us at every table.

From "The Lord is my shepherd" to "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord"—the entire psalm is bookended by relationship. That's what this is all about. Not just God's provision or protection, though those are real. It's about belonging to God, being known by God, being pursued by God's goodness, and making our home in God's presence forever.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. Where in your life do you need to experience God's provision "in the presence of your enemies" – God's peace and abundance even while problems remain?
2. How does it change things to think of God's goodness and mercy as actively pursuing you rather than as things you have to chase after?

### **Video Discussion Questions:**

1. What is your experience with this Psalm? Is it familiar to you or was it new to you this week?
2. The Psalm begins by asserting that we shall not want for anything because the Lord is our shepherd. Is this about God giving us everything we want?
3. Have you ever experienced God slowing you down when you're pushing too hard? Or moving you away from something that isn't good for you in the long term?
4. David is sure he will walk through dark valleys. Why do you think he doesn't fear any evil? Do you think that is realistic for you to have no fear when walking through dark valleys in your life?
5. The Hebrew word "follow" here is *rādaḇ*, which means "to pursue, chase, run after, hunt down." How does it make you feel to know that God's goodness and mercy don't just follow you but instead chase you down? Can you think of a time when you have experienced feeling like God's mercy is chasing you?
6. Where do you need to stop trying to be your own shepherd and let God lead instead?
7. What is your biggest takeaway from this week?

### **Prayer requests and other notes:**