

## The Book of Psalms

### Psalm 23

#### Opening Prayer

#### ***Read Psalm 23***

#### Overview

Psalm 23 is the most widely known and used psalm in the psalter. Its occurrence in times of need and times of grief is almost universal. Its simple language speaks a profound message of comfort to troubled hearts. There is also movement in this psalm of trust. The movement between what God has done and thus begotten trust in the psalmist in this life and the hope for what the Lord will do when death comes.

#### Outline/Structure

Some have divided the psalm between verses 1-4 which deal with the Lord as Shepherd and verses 5-6 which seem to picture the Lord as a king preparing a banquet. Yet the division I have chosen is to move from a declaration of what the Lord is already doing, verses 1-3, and the hope and prayer of what the Lord will do. This division is easiest to see as we consider the pronouns in the psalm. In verses 1-3 the pronouns are all third person singular making a declaration of what the Lord has done for the psalmist. In verses 4-6 the psalmist speaks to the Lord a prayer of trust and what the Lord will do.

- I. Declaration of trust in the Lord – 23:1-3
- II. Prayer of trust in the Lord – 23:4-6

#### Declaration of trust -23:1-3

:1 - “Shepherd” – One of the most enduring and prolific metaphors for the Lord used in the Scriptures. There are many, many passages that picture God (Yahweh) as our Shepherd.<sup>1</sup> Certainly David knew what it meant to be a shepherd for that was his vocation. (*1 Samuel 16:11, 19*) While time doesn’t permit us to go through all the passages that deal with God as Shepherd in the Scriptures, indeed that could be a study unto itself, I would like to look at two of them.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 48:15; 49:24; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10; Psalm 80:2

**Read Ezekiel 34:10-16**

*Who are the shepherds that the Lord is against in this passage?(You may need to look back for context here)*

*What is the primary thing that God is going to do for His sheep?*

*How is the Great Commission foreshadowed in verse 13?*

*What similarities of language do you find between this passage and Psalm 23?*

**Read John 10:1-18**

*Why does Jesus call Himself the “door” for the sheep?*

*What causes the sheep to follow Jesus?*

*What is the primary thing that the Good Shepherd does for the sheep?*

*How does verse 16 foreshadow the Great Commission?*

- “I shall not want” – We often need to be reminded that it is God who provides everything we have and need in this life. The Israelites also forgot who did and would provide for them. **Read Deuteronomy 2:7 and 8:7-9.** Like the Israelites we forget what the Lord has done and what the Lord will do.
- :2 - Both the images of “green pastures” and “quiet waters” are meant to convey places of rest. Interestingly these places of rest are something the Lord has already given the psalmist. While it is absolutely true that we talk about death as a rest and Sabbath with the Lord, we must not forget that it is also God’s desire to give us places of rest and refreshment even in this life.

*Where do you find rest for your heart, mind, and soul in this earthly life?*

*How do worship and the sacraments provide this rest?*
- :3 - “soul” – the Hebrew word here is *nephesh* and can refer to “soul” or “life”. If we look back to **Psalm 19:7** we see that the Law (Torah) restores the soul. Given the spiritual character of the restoring and its association with the Word of God, it is best to understand *nephesh* as soul here rather than “physical life”.
  - “paths of righteousness” – This may be understood as correct paths, that is paths in which I walk righteously. Or it may be understood as paths that keep me in right relationship with the Lord. Since the remainder of the psalm is about my relationship with the Shepherd, it makes sense to understand these paths as those which God’s mercy and love provide to keep me in right relationship for His name’s sake.

- “for His name’s sake” – God acts to protect His name and reputation as both powerful and loving. **Read Psalm 25:11; 31:3; Joshua 7:9; Ezekiel 20:44; 39:25**

*Why was it important for the Lord to protect His name?*

*How do we sometimes muddy the name of God in the world?*

*Why is our conduct as “Christ”-ians important?*

#### Prayer of Trust in the Lord – 23:4-6

- :4 - Now the focus of the psalmist changes from what is to what will be. This change of focus also drives the change from declaration of what God has done to the prayerful of what God will do.

- Darkness or shadow is often paired with death in the Scriptures. **Read Job 3:5; 10:20-22; 38:17**

*Why is darkness an apt description/metaphor for death?*

*Why do we need not fear the darkness of death? **Read Colossians 1:13***

- “Your rod and your staff” – Typically shepherds carried two tools with them. The “rod” which was tucked into their belt was a weapon to be used against wild animals and beat them away from the sheep. The “staff” was a walking stick used to guide sheep, rescue them with its crook, and knock down fruit or other things for the sheep to eat from trees.

*What weapon does Christ use against our greatest enemy, Satan?*

**Read Hebrews 2:14-15**

- :5 - The image of verse 5 is the image of a feast that God provides. While there are many things that we could elaborate on here, we will focus on two.

1. The feast that God provides points forward to the “marriage supper of the Lamb and His bride, the church”. **Read Revelation 19:7-9**

a. *What was the linen that the Bride was clothed in?*

b. *How are we invited to the marriage support of the Lamb? **Read Luke 14:15-24***

2. “In the presence of my enemies” – This may be understood two different ways:

a. In front of and as a demonstration before one’s enemies

b. With my enemies who are a part of the banquet

*Which interpretation seems best to you?*

*What might be arguments for either?*

- :6 - The word translated as “lovingkindness” in most English translations is the Hebrew word *hesed* and is roughly equivalent to mercy and grace. It is God’s love given though we don’t deserve it. This mercy and grace is the

very reason that the last line of the psalm is true – *I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*. It is by God’s grace that we are finally through the valley of the shadow of death brought to the feast within the Father’s house.

- “house of the Lord” – I prefer to see this as both a current and a future thing. As we dwell within the Lord’s house here on earth we are constantly pointed to Christ who will eventually bring us to the Lord’s house where he has prepared a place for us. (*John 14*).

### Summary

Psalm 23 is the great psalm of trust. It provides immense comfort, not only to those who grieve, but also to those of us struggling with whatever life may bring. The Shepherd who will provide and cause us to lack nothing is also the Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep that they may have eternal life.

Closing Prayer