

The Lord is My Shepherd I Shall Not Want

PSALM 23 • PART 1

Baxter T. Exum (#1593)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
May 2, 2021



****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE****

It is a great blessing to be with you this morning! I hope all of you have the elements for the Lord's Supper, either from home or from the table in the entryway. John/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning. And then we hope to sing "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less" (#438). And, as usual, most of us are giving either online or through the mail, but there is a basket on the back table as well.

This morning we would like to express our thanks to Al Ovadal for his service as a deacon over the past several years. He recently stepped down, and we are very thankful for his service. We remember what Paul said in 1 Timothy 3:13, when he said, ***"Those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus."*** If this verse applies to anybody, it applies to Al.

We are also thankful that Victor Glover has safely returned to earth this morning. Victor is a Christian brother who traveled to the International Space Station last November, and he has finally returned home, splashing down in the Gulf of Mexico about 3 o'clock this morning. We praise God for his safe return.

As our custom has been, we are starting today with a brief summary of God's plan for saving us. We have sinned, those sins have separated us from God. He is holy; we are not. But, God has made a way for us to come back. God sent his only Son to live a perfect life, he was crucified, offering himself as a sacrifice for our sins. In response, we believe the message, we turn away from sin, we confess Jesus as being the Son of God, and we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, at which point the Christian life begins. And once again, we have an example this week. Several days ago, we got an update from Don Blackwell, who preaches for the Gospel Broadcasting Network. Some of you might remember Mark Teske speaking here maybe a year and a half ago, introducing GBN. Well, just over a week ago, they posted a picture of Evan, who was baptized as a result of the teaching he had access to online. Evan reached out to GBN, they put him in touch with the West Broward congregation in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and they had the privilege of baptizing Evan for the forgiveness of his sins. So, we rejoice with Evan and the West Broward congregation this morning. And we share this by way of encouragement: What Evan has done, you can do this morning. If you have any questions, if you would like to study together, please get in touch.

Before we get to our study of God's word this morning, and speaking of people learning about the Lord online, we'd like to pass along another update on our website. It's always interesting to me to see where people are from as they access our site. And in case you are joining us on the phone and cannot see this, the chart indicates that a vast majority of people visit our website from right here in the United States (at nearly 79%). Beyond this, people are joining us from China, then India, followed by Canada, the Philippines, the Bahamas, Mexico, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and then it trails off from there. But we share this as a reminder that people are finding us online.

It would be a serious understatement to suggest that we are living in some uncertain times. I am reminded of Joshua's command as the people get ready to cross over the Jordan to enter the Promised Land as he tells them to follow the Ark of the Covenant. And the reason he gives (in Joshua 3:4) is so **"...that you may know the way by which you shall go, for you have not passed this way before."** In other words, they are in a completely new situation, and so they were to pay special attention to following the Lord very carefully. And that's where we are right now. We've been through more than a year of uncharted territory. We've had some rather severe restrictions from our local health department, a number of our members have been extremely ill, several have lost loved ones, and now, it seems as if we are perhaps starting to come out on the other side of this. And yet, we do still face some uncertainty.

Today and next Lord's Day, then, instead of focusing on what to do or not to do, instead of getting even more stressed out by our circumstances, I want us to go to the word of God for some encouragement! I need some hope right now! We need some reassurance. And as we look to the Word for some encouragement, I'd like for us to think about a request from one of our senior saints, a request for a lesson on the 23rd Psalm. Psalm 23 is perhaps one of the well-known passages in the Bible. In fact, I wonder how many times we've heard this Psalm. For most of us, I would guess dozens of times at the least, but there's a chance we've heard it hundreds of times, if not more. We hear it at funerals. I know I've heard it in a number of movies through the years. This is a song we sometimes sing, even today. Back in the olden days, back when we used actual songbooks, I think we had at least three versions of Psalm 23 set to music, not to mention many other songs referring to God as our Shepherd. We go to this Psalm for encouragement, and with good reason. And this is what we need today. We need some encouragement from God.

In the 23rd Psalm (in English), we have 119 words, consisting of 474 characters, divided out into 6 verses, over 15 lines. Of those 119 words, 90 are only one syllable. Microsoft Word analyzes highlighted text by using the Flesch-Kincaid method and suggests the 23rd Psalm has a reading level of 1.6, something that can be understood by the average first grader. Another online tool suggests a reading level of 2nd or 3rd grade. But either way, the words in this Psalm are simple and easy to understand.

But for now, let's get started by looking at all six verses of the 23rd Psalm – Psalm 23:1-6, a Psalm of King David,

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.***
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.***
- 3 He restores my soul;
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.***
- 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,***

*I 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 have anointed my head with oil;

My cup overflows.

⁶ *Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,*

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Before we dive into the bulk of this Psalm next week, this morning I just want us to really focus in on verse 1, because verse 1 is what this Psalm is all about, ***“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”*** This is the theme. Everything else in Psalm 23 is an explanation of this truth, ***“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”*** Today, then, we have a sermon with one point, and the one point, the one big idea today is this, ***“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”***

I. We will look at this one verse a piece at a time starting with the word LORD.

When David refers to the ***“LORD,”*** you’ll notice that most translations have it in all caps, indicating that we are dealing with God’s personal name, sometimes translated as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah.” Transliterated into English (one English letter for every Hebrew letter), it comes across as Y-H-W-H. And without any vowels, that’s a bit hard for us to pronounce, isn’t it! And that’s the issue here. We have a name that is somewhat unpronounceable. The meaning is basically “I AM.” And it goes back to God meeting Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. Moses, by the way, was working as a shepherd at that point, wasn’t he! He was raised in Egypt, but fled at the age of 40, and now at the age of 80, God has some big plans for Moses: He wants him to go back to Egypt and to demand that Pharaoh let his people go. Well, in Exodus chapters 3-4, Moses gives a series of excuses as to why he’s not qualified, and in that series of excuses, as Moses tries to anticipate objections, Moses says to God (in Exodus 3:13), ***“Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’; and He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”*** That almost makes no sense, does it? The ***“I AM”*** has sent me to you. As I understand it, though, this is the basis of God’s name: He is! He is the Existing One. So, when David says that the ***“LORD”*** is my shepherd, he’s basically referring to God as the ***“I AM.”*** He’s using God’s proper name.

II. The next part of this is that the Lord is MY SHEPHERD.

I would point out, first of all, that this Psalm is personal. In fact, I hope we noticed all of the personal pronouns in this passage. If I’ve counted correctly, David uses the words ***“I,” “my,”*** or ***“me,”*** a total of 17 times in only six verses. And he’s not bragging, but he’s emphasizing how personal this is. The Lord isn’t just “a” shepherd, or “the” shepherd, or “Israel’s shepherd,” or “the only true shepherd,” but he is ***“my”*** shepherd, ***“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”*** And the same goes for us: The Lord can also be our shepherd. So, the Lord was David’s shepherd, but he is also our shepherd.

In ancient Israel, and in most cultures to this day, the work of a shepherd was difficult and dirty and often fell on the youngest in the family, as it did on David, the author of this Psalm. It was not glamorous. At all. David, as a young man, had to stay home and take care of the sheep, as his older brothers went off to war. Shepherds had to live with their sheep 24/7, 365 days a year – day and night, summer and winter, rain or shine, in all conditions. Their job was to protect, and guide, and feed, and to keep those sheep alive and healthy, primarily

for the production of wool, but sometimes for milk or for meat. And very quickly, good shepherds would get to know their sheep personally – by name. They would get to know their strengths, and weaknesses, and personalities. And in the same way, those sheep would get to know their shepherd, developing a relationship of trust.

Unfortunately, we have become somewhat disconnected from sheep in our society, especially here in Madison. So, for several years now, I have attended the Wisconsin Sheep and Wool Festival in early September, at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds. If you would like to meet me there this year, please let me know! One of the highlights for me has been seeing the Crook and Whistle Nationals, a nationwide competition for shepherds and sheepdogs. Absolutely amazing. From several football fields away, they will direct their dogs, just by whistling, and will guide their sheep around various obstacles on the other end of the field, before bringing them back into the pen. Another highlight is the sheep shearing demonstration. It takes maybe 90 seconds to shear a sheep, and they get several pounds of wool off of each one. They also have a barn with a number of lambs, and some UW veterinary science students were there feeding them. The one on the right, I believe, was just about 12 hours old. And then you can also eat sheep! That was a bit weird, but I did miss the lamb brats by a few minutes last year (they ran out right before I walked up to the window), so I hope to go back and get one this year. And then, in addition to the food, they also had two barns full of everything you can imagine made out of wool. But this is right here near us, just a few minutes east of here in Jefferson County. I share this to give us another opportunity to become more familiar with sheep. Especially as city-slickers, we might benefit from going over to Jefferson in September.

We don't need a PhD in sheep-ology, but even without an extensive education or experience, most of us probably know that sheep are not really too intelligent. They are needy. They have no natural defenses. They don't have claws, or fangs. They are known for following. To be called a "sheep" is not a compliment. We've heard it thrown out as an insult over the past year or so, haven't we? "Oh, you are doing this or that? Well, you are just a sheep!" That's not a compliment! Sheep are not known for thinking on their own. They are easily spooked, sometimes running in sheer terror from the sound of a plastic bag flapping in the breeze. They've been known to be paralyzed by the sight of an approaching fire, even to the point of being burned, unable to make the decision to move. They've been known to tip over, and not be able to get back up. With a full load of wool, they are somewhat top-heavy, especially when wet, and they might need help getting up. They need to be led. They wander. They eat, and eat, and eat, and have a way of eating themselves right off the edge of a cliff or into other kinds of danger. Sheep haven't changed too much over the past 3,000 years since this Psalm was first written. It's a Psalm that crosses cultures and time itself. And even if we aren't shepherds ourselves, most of us have some concept of sheep and what shepherds do. Most of us have seen sheep. We've been to the county fair. We've driven by farms in the countryside. One of my first home visits as a preacher was to a sheep farmer down near Evansville. I showed up just as they were loading sheep on a trailer to take from one farm to another, "Do you want to help?" "Sure!" And there I was, chasing sheep into a trailer. The son in the family was on the high school football team down there. We were tackling sheep together! I learned that sheep can jump. They can jump over a high school football player. I learned quite a bit that day.

And this is probably a good place to point out that we are, indeed, the sheep in this picture! We are the followers. We are the ones who get lost all the time. We are the ones who are quite likely to eat ourselves right off the edge of a cliff. We are the ones who need to be tackled from time to time, for our own good. As the prophet says in Isaiah 53:6, ***"All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way."*** That's us! We are the sheep in this picture. In fact, I've read that we (as God's people) are referred to as being "sheep" more than 200 times in the word of God. So, ***"The Lord is my shepherd."***

III. **This leads us to the last part of this: Because the Lord is David's shepherd, he is able to say, "I SHALL NOT WANT."**

The word translated as "**want**" here in the NASB is a word referring to lacking something, to being in need. It's been translated elsewhere as being "empty" or "scarce." The NIV has David saying, "**The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.**" Eugene Peterson, in *The Message* says, "**God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing!**" So, the idea is: With God as my shepherd, I will never be in need. I will never be empty. God is all I need. The Lord is my shepherd, and he is enough. God is all I need.

And this is a message we need to hear today. If this past year has taught us anything, it's taught us that we have no idea what's coming next! So many things have happened that we never could have predicted. And yet, through it all, God has taken care of us. We have not been in want. A year ago, I remember one of our families making a few toilet paper deliveries. Just a few years ago, I could have never even imagined referring to a "toilet paper delivery" in a sermon. And yet, here we are. You all remember the situation a year ago. But God took care of us.

We understand Paul's promise in Philippians 4:17, when he said that, "**...my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.**" We have seen that to be true. On their own, sheep need everything, but with God as our shepherd, we need nothing, "**I shall not want.**"

Conclusion:

So, where is God in what we are going through right now? What is God's role in this? Well, it depends. He is the Good Shepherd, but what role he takes in our lives is up to us. To take advantage of what comes next in this Psalm, we need to let him be the shepherd. He's willing to be by shepherd, and he's willing to be your shepherd, but that requires us admitting that we are sheep. And sometimes, that's hard to do. It's hard to give up that illusion of control. It's hard to turn over the leadership of our lives to somebody else, but that's what the Christian life is. We hear the good news, we believe it, and then we turn back to God in humble submission and obedience. We allow God to be God, and that's what this Psalm is all about.

He is our shepherd. And because he is our shepherd, we shall not want. He is enough. God is all we need. He is guiding us, watching over us, walking with us through this. And everything in the rest of Psalm 23 hinges on this. Because he is our shepherd, everything else in this song is true as well. And that's where we hope to pick up next week, if the Lord wills.

Before we close this part of our service with a prayer, I'd like to share a prophecy from Revelation 7:16-17. On the island of Patmos, the door cracks open just a bit, John sees something in the future, and referring to God's people, he says, "**They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.**" We are looking forward to that!

Let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God, the great I AM, the Shepherd of your people. Today, we come to you as your sheep, knowing that we need you at all times. Thank you for being merciful to us. Thank you for bringing us together this morning.

This morning we are thankful for the progress we've seen with our COVID numbers here in Dane County. We pray that our situation would continue to improve. At the same time, we are also thinking of our Christian family in India right now. Many are suffering, with nowhere to go. We pray for healing and peace.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. Thank you for being all that we need.

In Jesus we pray, AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com