



Psalm 23

I shall not lack

I stayed in a Gypsy village in Bulgaria for parts of two summers, in 1992 and 1993, teaching the Scriptures in a church there. I noticed that a shepherd came by each morning and picked up sheep from the various pens in the village and led them out to graze for the day. One morning, I took a photo of him and his sheep.

For as long as I've been a pastor, that photo has hung in my study. It reminds me of me of my vocation. However, a few weeks ago, when I was studying Psalm 23, I looked at the photo and it inspired me in a different way. I'm a shepherd, yes, but Psalm 23 famously begins, "The Lord is my shepherd." Whatever my responsibilities as a shepherd, the Lord is *my* shepherd.

Psalm 23 is an intensely personal composition. David, the author, uses no second-person pronouns such as "you," unless he's addressing the Lord. He doesn't even use any first-person plural pronouns such as "we." Instead, he uses first-person singular pronouns such as "I," "me," and "my" a staggering seventeen times in a mere six verses.

However, David writes the psalm not least so that others will read it and learn from it, especially by identifying with his experience. The Holy Spirit, by inspiring David, has given you these words so that you too can speak them, assimilate them, and live them. The Lord is *your* shepherd. Make Psalm 23 yours.

David employs three images for the Lord: shepherd, host, and warrior. Kings were shepherds, hosts, and warriors. They led their people, like shepherds led their sheep; they invited honored guests to their feasts; and they pursued their enemies. In writing Psalm 23, David is writing about the Lord as king.

I give you, as we begin a new year, Psalm 23, which gives you hope.

Psalm 23:1:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

A better translation for the word "want," given the way the English language is used today, is "lack." Biblically, there's nothing wrong with wanting per se. Jesus wanted. In fact, he wanted intensely. On one occasion, he told his disciples, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). If the Lord is my shepherd, I will want, but I will not lack—which is an amazing claim when you think about it.

Moses, speaking to the Israelites after their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, said, "These forty years the Lord your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing" (Deuteronomy 2:7). David says elsewhere, "The young lions suffer want and hunger; / but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing" (Psalm 34:10).

Much of advertising is based on the premise that you can be convinced that you lack something and that the product being offered to you will make you lack no more. Many of the problems in the world are created by people who are motivated to make up for some perceived lack. What a different world it would be if it were populated by people who believe that the Lord is their shepherd and therefore also believe that they do not lack and never will lack. There would be a lot less to fight over.

If we lack nothing, then we have everything—everything we need, that is. What do we need? We need to know God and follow Jesus. Knowing God is exhilarating. Following Jesus is exhilarating. The Lord, our shepherd, gives us everything we need to know God and follow Jesus.

Much of the spiritual life involves entering into the reality that the divine shepherd meets our every need. I will not lack. Can you believe it? Read on.

The shepherd nourishes and refreshes

Psalm 23:2-3a:

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

3 He restores my soul.

If a shepherd “makes” a sheep lie down, he isn’t forcing it to do so. A sheep that’s been well fed wants to lie down. Food abounds—the pastures are green—but the sheep has had its fill. The shepherd provides food.

A sheep not only needs food; it also needs water. However, if it is near water, it also needs to be able to drink without drowning. If the water is a raging torrent, the sheep will not benefit. In fact, the sheep may be injured or worse. Therefore, the shepherd leads the sheep to “still waters.”

The word translated “soul” could also be translated “life.” A sheep doesn’t have a soul, but the shepherd restores the life of the sheep as he provides food and water. Humans, on the other hand, have souls, so the divine shepherd also provides spiritual food and water in order to restore our souls. As Jesus says, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). The shepherd nourishes and refreshes us not least with his word—not least with Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 is a lush, green pasture in a wide-open meadow. Psalm 23 is a crystal-clear pool fed by a cool mountain stream. Eat from it. Drink from it.

Skipping around damaged cells

David Hansen, a pastor, tells this story:

I visited an elderly gentleman in a nursing home for several years. He was not a member of my congregation, but as I visited members in his room we became friends. One day I approached him with a smile and a handshake and he no longer knew me. He’d had a stroke. I reintroduced myself from scratch, figuring we would just start the friendship over. The damage was more severe than that. He didn’t know where he was, he didn’t know his own name, he didn’t know he was strapped in a wheelchair.

So I just asked him if I could read the Bible to him. I was surprised when he said, cogently, “Yes, please do.”

I began reading Psalm 23 slowly. “The Lord is my shepherd.” Pause. His head lifted slightly. He opened his mouth.

“I shall not want,” he replied, clearly. I smiled and continued.

“He maketh me to lie down . . .” Pause. I’d seen this kind of thing before.

“In green pastures,” came the response.

We continued through the psalm. I prompted him with a line, and he gave me the next one. Near the end, when I said, “Surely goodness and mercy . . .” he rattled off the rest before I could interrupt him: “shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

When we finished we both smiled and our eyes were not dry. He still didn’t know who I was, and he hadn’t remembered his name; but in a profound sense he’d refound himself. By using a portion of the Word of God he’d memorized as a child and cherished his whole life, we’d skipped around the damaged cells, and just maybe we found his soul.¹

Perhaps Psalm 23 will restore your soul this morning.

The shepherd leads

Psalm 23:3b:

**He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.**

For a sheep, “paths of righteousness” are nothing more than straight paths. For humans, “paths of righteousness” include a moral quality. The divine shepherd leads us not astray but in the “way that leads to life” (Matthew 7:14). The divine shepherd guides us through his word and through the Spirit (Psalm 119:105, 143:10; John 16:13; Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:18). Our shepherd leads us in the right way to the right places at the right times.

He guides us in this way “for his name’s sake”—not least because his reputation is at stake. If he guides us in paths of righteousness and such guidance is seen to be beneficial, then others will trust him. He wants to guide everyone, because he loves everyone, but he will not force himself on those who do not want him.

For many who have come to Christ at a young age, or have ostensibly come to Christ, if they journey away

from the Lord, they begin to do so with a relationship. At first, they don't think they're walking away from the Lord, but that's what they're doing, and then at some point they conclude that they don't believe anymore—if they ever believed in the first place.

For a few years after I graduated from college, I became involved in two relationships, one after the other, that had little to nothing to do with Jesus. In both cases, the women broke up with me. I was crushed. However, in retrospect, but not at the time, I sensed the leading of the Lord—in paths of righteousness, or at least back to paths of righteousness.

The shepherd protects

Psalm 23:4:

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.**

For a sheep, “the valley of the shadow of death” is a steep, dark ravine where it can't see and may be especially vulnerable to predators. In such places, a sheep needs the shepherd to protect it. In such a valley, a good shepherd wards off predators with his rod and leads the sheep away from danger with his staff so that the sheep need not be afraid.

As humans, we will inevitably end up in places of darkness, so to speak, where little makes sense, and may be vulnerable to the lies of Satan, who wants us to believe that we lack. Even in such places we need not fear, because the shepherd is “with” us. As David says elsewhere to the Lord, “If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Psalm 139:8). The shepherd will protect us from evil (with his rod, so to speak) and lead us away from evil (with his staff, so to speak). The apostle John assures us: “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

No matter where we are, even in the darkest places, our shepherd is with us, and his promise to protect us from evil and lead us away from evil comforts us.

Dallas Willard says that everyone who trusts the Lord is in a position to say, “Let the worst happen! Let

the worst happen, and God and I will go on together in the abundance of his being.”²

The divine shepherd

Jesus is the divine shepherd. In the gospel of John, he declares, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). He nourishes and refreshes, he leads, and he protects.

In Mark 6, a great crowd followed Jesus to a desolate place. If the shepherd in Psalm 23 “makes me *lie down* in *green pastures*,” Jesus “commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass.” Jesus fed the multitude with five loaves of bread and two fish—with plenty left over.

Moreover, before Jesus commanded them to sit down and before he fed them, he “saw” the great crowd, “and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” What did the good shepherd do, out of his compassion for the great crowd of lost sheep? “And he began to teach them many things.” Before he fed their stomachs with food, he fed their souls with his word (Mark 6:30-44). Indeed, “He restores my soul.”

Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28). Indeed, “He leads me in paths of righteousness.” Indeed, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”

So far, David has likened the Lord to a shepherd. Next, he likens the Lord to a host.

The host serves

Psalm 23:5:

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

To share a meal with someone in David's time in that part of the world was charged with meaning. If you invited someone to your table, you were affirming and honoring that person. When people broke bread together, they shared their lives with each other. To dine with the king was a tremendous honor. When he

was king, David invited Mephibosheth, who was lame, to dine at his table, a tremendous honor (2 Samuel 9).

Here, preparation is involved. This is no last-minute, throw-something-together snack. Everything is well thought-out. The table has been prepared especially for you, the honored guest of the divine host, so that you and God can share life with each other. Moreover, the meal is shared in the presence of enemies, which means that Satan and his demons have been defeated and all they can do is look on as God honors you.

Furthermore, anointing a guest's head with oil was a sign of friendship (Psalms 45:7, 92:10; Luke 7:46). Elsewhere, David says this about friendship: "It is like the precious oil on the head, / running down on the beard, / on the beard of Aaron, / running down on the collar of his robes!" (Psalm 133:2).

If your cup overflows, you not only have enough, you also have more than enough. This is more than not lacking, if you will. This isn't just a meal; this a lavish banquet. The menu includes an abundance of love and forgiveness and belonging. "He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love" (Song of Solomon 2:4).

Annual party

Have you ever been to a gathering in which the host has thought of everything?

My mother thought of everything. For our annual family Christmas Eve party, which involved as many as thirty people some years, she pulled out all stops: fine china and silverware; multiple innovative and delicious courses, including one year a suckling pig with an apple in its snout; porcelain place cards with people's name on them; strategic seating assignments; pressed tablecloths—you name it.

You were invited. You were welcomed. You were wanted. You were loved. You feasted.

The Lord has thought of everything. He prepares a table for you. He anoints your head with oil. Your cup overflows.

The divine host

Jesus is not only the divine shepherd; he is also the divine host. He shared meals with people, most notably outcasts, even inviting them into where he was dwelling.

One occasion some Pharisees and scribes took umbrage, grumbling, "this man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:1-2). Then Jesus told his most famous story, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Indeed, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

Jesus, the divine host, prepares for us a lavish banquet, first by inviting us to the Lord's Table and second by inviting us to the eternal marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9). "For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink" (John 6:55). "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" (John 7:37-38). Indeed, "My cup overflows."

So far, David has likened the Lord to a shepherd and host. Finally, he likens the Lord to a warrior—with a strange twist.

The warrior pursues

Psalm 23:6:

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.**

The word translated "mercy" is a Hebrew word that is better translated "loyal love" or "steadfast love." It appears throughout the Hebrew Scriptures to convey the Lord's covenant love for his people. The word translated "follow" would be better translated "pursue." Kings would pursue their enemies. David, who was pursued by King Saul, would know all about being pursued.

In this case, the divine warrior pursues, all right, but he pursues with the weapons of his goodness and loyal love, defeating our suspicions and winning us over. If goodness and loyal love will pursue us "all the days" of our lives, then there is not one day when goodness and loyal love will not pursue us. There will not be one day, no matter how dark, when you will not be able to turn around and see goodness and loyal love pursuing you.

Do you have the sense that something is chasing you and that you have to keep ahead of it, whatever it is? In some of your nightmares, have you had to flee from someone or something? I remember one vivid nightmare in which I was being chased by demonic

creatures. If goodness and loyal love are pursuing you, it doesn't matter what else is pursuing you. Look behind you. What do you see? Can you see goodness and loyal love? Can you see the Lord?

Simon Tugwell says, "So long as we imagine it is we who have to look for God, we must often lose heart. But it is the other way about—He is looking for us."³

The divine warrior

Jesus is the divine shepherd and the divine host. He is also the divine warrior. He fights and wins the war against evil not with conventional weapons but with wood and nails—nails that pierced his hands and feet and affixed him to that wood. As he was about to be crucified, Jesus said, "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:31-32).

If you ever doubt whether the Lord is pursuing you, all you need to do is look back, say, two thousand years to that ugly hill outside Jerusalem, and look to a man hanging on a cross there. Indeed, "Surely, goodness and loyal love shall follow me all the days of my life."

An eternal home

For David, the house of the Lord is the moveable tabernacle, which will later be replaced by the fixed temple, which his son Solomon will build. David has an affinity for the house of the Lord (Psalms 27:4-5, 36:8). Wherever he is, he seems to long for the house of the Lord, which is the Lord's dwelling place on earth. David wants to dwell where the Lord dwells.

But how can David say that he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever? David seems to have broken through to understand the reality of what the tabernacle, and later the temple, symbolized and anticipated. Indeed, in this psalm he declares that the Lord is "with" him regardless of his location. Today, the Spirit of God dwells in us and among us.

Therefore, we who believe in Jesus dwell with the Lord wherever we are, in intimate fellowship, and we will

dwell with him forever, in the new creation, which itself is a temple (Revelation 21:22). We have an eternal home. Indeed, "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

New perspective

The Lord is my king. Like a shepherd, he nourishes and refreshes me, he leads me, and he protects me: I shall not lack. Like a host, he serves me: My cup overflows. Like a warrior, he defeats my suspicions and wins me over: Surely goodness and loyal love will pursue me all the days of my life.

And what? And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

What a psalm! Make it yours.

Your assignment this week is to spend five minutes a day with Psalm 23 for six days, Monday through Saturday. On Monday, read the entire psalm, then read, meditate on, and pray over verse 1. On Tuesday, read the entire psalm, then read, meditate on, and pray over verse 2. Follow the same pattern for the following days. On Saturday, the final day, read the entire psalm, then read, meditate on, and pray through verse 6. Then you're done. That's six days for six verses, thirty minutes total.

See if that doesn't give you a new perspective for the new year.

Endnotes

1. David Hansen, *A Little Handbook on Having a Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
2. Dallas Willard, *Life Without Lack: Living in the Fullness of Psalm 23* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Books, 2018), 36.
3. Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Books, 1997), 69.