

## HE SHEPHERDS US

Psalm 23:1–6

Key Verse: 23:1

“The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want.”

Do you ever feel insecure? Some insecurities are small and temporary, like feeling unprepared for an exam. But some are chronic and affect us deeply. Whether it's our appearance, how we fit in socially, our relationships, how we're doing at school or work, our finances, especially our identity: insecurities can cripple us. They might be obvious, but often we're unaware of them, and always overcompensating. Today we're looking at Psalm 23. It may be the most familiar of all the Psalms. It's short and simple, but deep. Every line of it points us to Jesus. The main idea is a deep confidence in him. Realizing that he is “my” Shepherd changes us. What does it mean that he is my Shepherd? How can we have this conviction, this confidence? May God speak to us through his word.

Usually we study the Bible to see what God wants us to do. But this Psalm focuses on *what God does for us*. Verse 1 begins, “The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want.” It's the main statement, and everything else here illustrates it. First, David calls him “the LORD.” In Hebrew it's “Yahweh.” This name for God appears first in Genesis 2, when he created the Garden of Eden for human beings and made a covenant with them. “The LORD,” or “Yahweh,” means the God who's deeply interested in our happiness, who loves us in every way.

David says he's “my Shepherd.” And he's about to tell us how God shepherds him. But before we get into that, let's think about the word “Shepherd.” With this word David is saying God is his Ruler, his Leader, his Provider, his Protector. Most of all, “my Shepherd” means God cares for him personally. David is so delighted, so comforted, by this one truth: the LORD, the Creator of all things, is his Shepherd. David's life was not easy. He experienced many dangers and hardships. But through it all, he realized God was always there, loving and caring for him like a shepherd. In all his struggles, through learning to rely on God, David gained a very personal knowledge of God, a very personal faith.

In contrast, there's Jacob in Genesis. As an ambitious young man, Jacob didn't know God very well. He used God to get all he wanted out of life: honor, love and wealth, in that order. Jacob was good at relying on himself. Frankly, he was engrossed in the world. Along the way, he hurt many people and didn't keep the vow he made to God. And he found that all he sought after didn't actually satisfy him. But God was still his patient Shepherd. In his old age, when he got to Egypt, he finally confessed, "...the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day" (Gen.48:15b). Through reflecting on life, Jacob came to know and worship God his Shepherd. It was God's grace to him.

Because David knows God as "my Shepherd," he says, "I shall not want." He doesn't mean he's suddenly become an apathetic, desireless person. He means he'll never be lacking anything for true happiness. Why? Because he's got the source of happiness: God himself, who loves him. In another psalm David writes, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you" (Ps.73:25). People can be so cold, mean, and scary. But God satisfies our hearts and souls like no one else can. His love for us is real, and it's best seen in our Lord Jesus. He told the Samaritan woman trying to find love in men, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I give him will never be thirsty again" (John 4:13–14a). After tasting his love Paul wrote, "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil.3:8a). In Jesus we become full, complete, whole, because we find no greater love than in him.

Being unloved is serious. Teachers can quickly tell if a child is unloved; it shows in their demeanor and behavior. But a well-loved child is happy, bright, and able to learn. As children we need healthy love from our caregivers. As adults we still need love, but now it's from God. Without his love we'll always feel empty, insecure, lost. How can we experience his love? It's simple: just turn to Jesus, start leaning into him, relying on him. Whether we've failed in every way, or succeeded in every way, we can turn to Jesus. He'll embrace us like no one else will. He's our Good Shepherd who laid down his life for us. He truly loves us.

In four simple sentences David shows how God cares for him. Read verses 2–4. First, "He makes me lie down in green pastures." Basically it means God feeds him. Green pastures mean abundant nutrition. But it's not just about physical food. This world is a spiritual desert. But God our Shepherd feeds our

souls with his life-giving words. As we feed on his words, we can “lie down,” find true satisfaction, true rest. Next, “He leads me beside still waters.” It’s a place where we can quench our thirst without any anxiety. The footnote says it can be translated as “waters of rest.” God knows how restless we can be, how anxious, how much we can compete, how deeply hurt we get. Yes, God wants us to work hard, but he also wants us to rest. He wants to lead us to a place where we can truly rest in him. Then David writes, “He restores my soul.” This is what the green pastures and still waters are all about. The word “restores” means “turns back.” The Bible says, “All we like sheep have gone astray” (Isa.53:6a). When we go astray, our souls get sick. Soul-sickness is so serious, and so prevalent. Mostly our souls get sick when we rebel against God. Isaiah wrote, “Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil” (Isa.1:5b–6). God our Shepherd longs for us, even with all our wounds, to return to him. He can give us green pastures and still waters that can restore our souls.

Matthew the former tax collector knew firsthand about sickness of the soul. His pursuit of money caused him to lose his self-respect and his integrity. But Jesus invited him, of all people, to follow him. In the New Testament Matthew wrote the most about the sick—not just the physically sick, but the spiritually sick. He described Jesus as the compassionate Physician who came for all the sick, including himself. As our Good Shepherd, he can restore even the most sick soul, if we just come to him. He said, “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt.9:13). He came to be “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt.11:19). He invites us all today, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt.11:28–29). As we allow our Lord Jesus to minister to us with his mercy and grace, he restores our souls.

Often we’re satisfied with the outward elements of ministry. We want people to come to Bible study and worship services, to leave a life of sin, start praying, teaching the Bible, and serving God. But often we’re not paying careful attention to what may be going on in their souls. So we don’t really understand them. Then we’re surprised when things fall apart. The same is true in our own

lives. We need to come to Jesus, really open up our souls to him and let him care for us. And we need to ask his grace and mercy to help us care for the souls of others. May we lead people to truly come to Jesus to be restored in their souls.

David's fourth sentence here is, "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." The clincher is the last phrase: "for his name's sake." As he restores our souls, our deepest motivation changes. We gradually come out of a life obsessed with self, our own honor, our own name's sake, and we learn to genuinely love him. We want to please him more than anything else. We want to glorify him with our lives. We want to imitate him, and truly follow him.

David goes on to add one more aspect of how God shepherded him. Read verse 4. He turns from talking *about* God to talking *to* God *personally*. It's his personal confession of faith and love to God. This world is full of the valleys of the shadow of death, of deep darkness. God doesn't just shelter us from these valleys; he goes with us through them. Though we're so weak, so vulnerable, he helps us walk through them without fear, relying on his presence. His rod is to defend us from our enemies. His staff is to gently pull us to safety and to the right direction. His rod and staff comfort us because they remind us of his presence in our lives, even in the scariest, most troubling times. We need to depend on Jesus to defend us. And we need to listen to the Holy Spirit as he works to guide us away from sin and temptation and closer to Jesus on the path of serving him.

David adds another personal confession. Read verse 5. He's describing how God vindicates him. David had many enemies skeptical of him, and secretly hoping he would fail. But God his Shepherd invited David to feast at a table in the presence of his enemies. In this way God was showing his grace and love to David. God anointed his head with oil, meaning he filled his mind with the Holy Spirit. His cup overflowing means so much: deep joy, satisfaction, contentment, as well as security, protection and abundant provision. God filled David's heart with deep gratitude for all his personal grace. As we get rooted and built up in Christ, we too are established in the faith and abound in thanksgiving (Col.2:7).

David concludes with hope. Read verse 6. Here the words "follow me" are literally "chase me" or "pursue me." And the word "mercy" is *hesed*, God's steadfast love. How can we have this relationship with God? God sent his Son Jesus to make a new covenant with us in his blood (Luke 22:20). If we repent of

our sins and accept his blood by faith, we have this covenant relationship with him. We fail all the time, but God pursues us with his steadfast, faithful love, to draw us back to him, to restore our souls, to keep us on the right path, to fill our lives with his love, joy, peace, and deep gratitude for his grace. Again, the focus is on what God will do for us all the days of our lives, if we have this personal blood covenant with our Lord Jesus. We can dwell in the house of the Lord today, through the Holy Spirit, enjoying the beauty of the Lord and his living presence. And we have the most amazing hope: to dwell in his house forever.

During my freshman year in college, I quickly found that my ambition was empty and foolish. I was studying hard but lost my direction. I was sinsick, and far away from God. Strangely, one day as I was walking to breakfast on campus, a hymn I had heard as a child came to my mind. It was "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine." I wondered what was going on inside me. Soon, I began Bible study in UBF. God began showing me he was calling me back to himself. It was a hard path, because my sins had made me so sick, and I had a lot of repenting to do. But God was so gracious and patient with me. After graduation, I prayed and God led me to a godly woman, my wife Kathy, with whom I've had the great joy of serving Jesus together for the past 40 years. All these years God has been patiently restoring my soul and helping me depend on Jesus, my Good Shepherd. He has filled me with his grace, peace and joy, and with the hope to be with him forever. This is what I pray for all of you.

So, do you feel insecure? What's the solution? Read verse 1 again. May God bless us to know Jesus personally as our Good Shepherd and find deep satisfaction and eternal security in him.