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Sermon Brief
Text: Psalm 23
Title: The God We Worship (Series #5)
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Today we continue our sermon series on worship. Again I want to look at the central focus of worship with an emphasis upon the God whom we are to worship. The Bible is packed full of images of God that provide insight and understanding. Perhaps one of the most beloved passages at this point is Psalm 23. Particularly since the Protestant Reformation, this Psalm has become one of the most read and memorized passages in the entire Bible. In the liturgical church traditions of the Church of England, the Lutheran Church and others this Psalm is one of the scripture texts recited at funerals to provide comfort and encouragement to grieving family members. For most other Protestant groups it serves a similar purpose as well.

This psalm of David reflects King David's experience of God during his life. The first part comes out of his youth as a shepherd boy, while the last part comes from his days as king of Israel. Follow with me in your Bible as I read this text.

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
- 3 he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
- 4 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.
- 5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- 6 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.¹

¹Psalm 23 in original Hebrew.

<p>Mizmor le'David, Hashem roei lo echsar.</p> <p>Binot desheh yarbiseini, al mei menuhot yenhaleini. Nafshi yeshovev yancheini bemagalei tzedek lema'an shemo. Gam ki elech be'gei tsalmavet, lo ira ra ki ata imadi, shivtecha u'mishantecha hema yenachamuni.</p> <p>Ta'aroch lefanai shulchan neged sorerai, dishanta beshe- men roshi, cosi revayah. Ach tov ve'heseid yirdefuni kol yemei hayai ve'shavti be'veit Hashem lorech yamim.</p>	<p>דודל רומזמ רסחא אל יער'ה</p> <p>ינלהני תוחונמי ימ לע, יניציברי אשד תואנב</p> <p>ומש נעמל קדצ ילעגמב ינחני בבושי ישפנ</p> <p>ךתנעשמו ךטבש, ידמע התא יכ ער עריא אל תומלצ יאגב ךלא יכ מג ינמחני המה</p> <p>היור יסוכ ישאר נמשב תנשד, יררצ דגנ וחלוש ינפל ךורעת</p> <p>מימי ךרואל'ה תיבב יתבשו ייה ימי לכ ינופדרי דסחו בוט ךא</p>
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Ψαλμός KB'

Κεφάλαιον 22 (Μαθ. 23)

Ψαλμός τῷ Δαυΐδ.

ΚΥΡΙΟΣ ποιμαίνει με καὶ οὐδέν με ὑστερήσει. 2 εἰς τόπον χλόης, ἐκεῖ με κατεσκήνωσεν, ἐπὶ ὕδατος ἀναπαύσεως ἐξέθρεψέ με, 3 τὴν ψυχὴν μου ἐπέστρεψεν. ὠδήγησέ με ἐπὶ τρίβους δικαιοσύνης ἕνεκεν τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ. 4 ἔαν

We are looking at Hebrew poetry with this text. And the psalm is unique even for the psalms in the Hebrew Bible. Its rhythm and poetic meter are stylistically distinct. And yet for the complexity of the original Hebrew text, the expression is simple and beautiful. In the English speaking world the influence of the King James Version text² has captured the admiration of countless numbers of Christians who have committed this text to memory.

In ancient Israel, the book of Psalms was the prayer book and the hymn book for worship in the temple in Jerusalem, and later also in the synagogue. All of the prayers and the songs used in temple worship were taken from the psalms. This is why the Hebrew text of the Massorites out of the middle ages added musical markings to the text so that Jewish people could learn how to recite and sing them correctly. Prayers and songs offered in worship had to be properly spoken, if they were to be acceptable to God. The psalms are grouped into five 'books' following the example of the 'five books of Moses.'³ Modern study of the psalms has sensed a thematic grouping of the psalms also present that provided a reason for their selection for use in different worship settings in the temple. Although Psalm 23 is difficult to group in this system because of its very generalized terminology, most scholars see it as a 'psalm of trust' or a 'psalm of confidence.' Most likely it was used in a variety of worship settings in the ancient Jewish world, particularly where expressions of thanksgiving to God were appropriate.⁴

In both Jewish and Christian traditions, Psalm 23 is a significant text for worshipping God. The psalm celebrates the goodness and care of Almighty God for His people. Its powerful affirmation of God comes out of the ancient Israelite culture of David's time when shepherds were commonplace in Israel and often served as a model for understanding God and for encouraging people to be caring of others. The Israelite culture of banqueting provides another important backdrop for the psalm. Although written as an individual celebrating God -- note the first person references -- the psalm is mostly used in corporate worship to celebrate God's goodness to His people collectively.

Out of this heritage of the use of the psalm in corporate worship, I want to focus today on Psalm 23 in our continuing series on worship. At the heart of worship is the celebration of God and His actions toward His people. For us to truly worship God we must know Him and understand who He is. The Bible describes many traits of God, and this psalm highlights some of them under the images of shepherd and host. Let's discover anew our God from this psalm so that we can better worship Him and celebrate His goodness to us.

BODY

I. God is our Shepherd, vv. 1-4

1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. 4 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.

The first image of God is stated clearly at the beginning: God is a shepherd. That is, He embodies the

γὰρ καὶ πορευθῶ ἐν μέσῳ σκιᾶς θανάτου, οὐ φοβηθήσομαι κακά, ὅτι σὺ μετ' ἐμοῦ εἶ· ἡ ράβδος σου καὶ ἡ βακτηρία σου, αὐταὶ με παρεκάλεσαν. 5 ἠτοίμασας ἐνώπιόν μου τράπεζαν, ἐξεναντίας τῶν θλιβόντων με· ἐλίπανας ἐν ἐλαίῳ τὴν κεφαλὴν μου, καὶ τὸ ποτήριόν σου μεθύσκον με ὡσεὶ κρᾶτιστον. 6 καὶ τὸ ἔλεός σου καταδιώξει με πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς μου, καὶ τὸ κατοικεῖν με ἐν οἴκῳ Κυρίου εἰς μακρότητα ἡμερῶν.

²KJV: 1 The LORD is my shepherd ; I shall not want . 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies : thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever .

³The following is the division of the psalms based on the Hebrew text grouping:

Book 1: Psalms 1-41

Book 2: Psalms 42-72

Book 3: Psalms 73-89

Book 4: Psalms 90-106

Book 5: Psalms 107-150

⁴Modern Judaism makes use of Psalm 23 in a variety of settings, both in synagogue sabbath worship and beyond, as the article "Psalm 23," Wikipedia online, notes:

Psalm 23 is traditionally sung by Jews in Hebrew at the third Shabbat meal on Saturday afternoon. It is also sung during the Yizkor service. Sephardic and some Hassidic Jews also sing during Friday afternoon services and as part of the Sabbath night and day meals. It is read at a cemetery funeral service instead of the traditional prayer during Jewish holidays.

ideal traits of a shepherd. Implicit in this image then is that we as His people are sheep. The psalmist thus writes from the perspective of a sheep being tended by the good Shepherd.

God as shepherd is a relatively common image in the Old Testament, particularly in the psalms.⁵ The early history of the Israelites as shepherds made such an association very natural. But also in the language of the Hebrew text here one hears a strong echo of the Exodus. God has shepherded His people out of slavery in Egypt and then took care of them in their wandering through the Sinai wilderness as a good shepherd.⁶ Many of the images of water, valley of darkness etc. reflect on the work of a shepherd in tending his flock, but point the ancient Jewish reader back to the Exodus and God's provision for the Israelites.

For Christians, the image of God as shepherd provides the basis for Jesus' claim to be the Good Shepherd in John 10, and similar passages.⁷

John 10:11-15 NRSV: 11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

Psalms 23 is never quoted in the New Testament but the background image of God as the good shepherd provided the basis for Jesus' words about Himself, and certainly had the undertones of the shepherd image of God in the Old Testament. Thus Christians experience God as shepherd in their lives through Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Thus, what does the psalmist say about God as Shepherd? The development of the image in verses 1b-4 point two basic directions: God cares for His flock and God leads His flock through difficulties.

As caring shepherd, vv. 1-3a.

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
- 3 he restores my soul.

The psalmist underscores four traits of God's care for us as His flock.

First, "I shall not want." This does not imply that God gives His sheep everything they desire. Such would be foolish and irresponsible. The Hebrew text more literally means, "I suffer no lack." That is, with God leading us, we will have what we fundamentally need. What does that mean? In the further development of the shepherding image, God's provision *then* means "green pastures," "still waters," and "restoration." The sheep are led by the shepherd to the pastures where abundant grass exists and after filling up on the grass they lie down in contentment to digest this food. When they need water to drink, the shepherd finds the inlets in the streams where the water isn't flowing rapidly and thus posing a danger for the sheep to step into it in order to find water to drink. Thus with such abundant provision the sheep find renewal and new energy; their life is thus 'renewed.'⁸

⁵"Yahweh is often spoken of as the *shepherd* of Israel (see 28:9; 77:20; 78:52; and especially Ezek 34:11–16)." [Robert G. Bratcher and William David Reayburn, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms*, Helps for translators (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 230.]

⁶"It is a metaphor drawing on the ancient resources of the Hebrew tradition; thus the psalmist, in utilizing the metaphor, is linking his thought to a broader concept, namely that of God who had been experienced as shepherd by many persons over many generations. And the metaphor is loaded in another sense, too; the terminology of the metaphor associates it with the Exodus from Egypt and the Hebrews' travels in the wilderness, when God's provision and protection had been known like that of a shepherd. Thus, in a subtle fashion, the psalmist is expressing confidence and trust in such a manner that his sentiments are linked to the great acts of divine salvation of the past, which in turn formed the basis of the covenant faith." [Peter C. Craigie, vol. 19, *Word Biblical Commentary : Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 206]

⁷The image of shepherd is frequent in the New Testament with some 17 instances.

⁸"*He restores my soul*: this line is literally 'He causes my *nefesh* to return' (for *nefesh* see comment at 3.2). The meaning is to restore vitality, vigor, strength; to renew, invigorate. This statement seems to express the result of Yahweh's care, as described in verse 2. GECL, *in fact, makes this line a continuation of the sentence in the previous verse, '... and [you] give me new strength.'*" [Robert G. Bratcher and William David Reayburn, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms*, Helps for translators (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 233]

All through these words in the Hebrew text, traces from words and images point to the Exodus.⁹ For ancient Jewish readers God's care of His people was highlighted in Moses' leading the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. God took care of them through all the wilderness wanderings. Subsequent generations would celebrate this in their worship of God.

For Christians, we experience God's abundant provision as well. Through our Good Shepherd, Jesus, we have experienced God's deliverance from bondage to sin and death. We have His ongoing presence to see after us day by day. He has sent His Spirit to be our source of renewal and strength in life.

Truly we then can celebrate God's goodness to us as we worship Him. He is our Shepherd indeed.

As a guiding shepherd, vv. 3b-4.

3 He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

4 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.

The second major emphasis in the shepherd image of God is His leadership of His people. The Hebrew text is graphic. God guides His sheep in the paths that are well worn. That is, these paths are literally ruts and clearly defined, because God has walked them so many times Himself that they have worn down into ruts. Thus, God takes us where He knows is safe and best. The sheep can trust in the direction the shepherd is leading them; he knows exactly where he is going in order to find the best pastures and water. He does this 'for his name's sake,' i.e., His reputation as a good shepherd depends on how well he takes care of his sheep.

Against this lies the negative image of bad shepherds both in the Old¹⁰ and New Testaments.

John 10:7-10, 12-13 (NRSV): 7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly....

12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away — and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

The background warning is that we must always seek God to lead us. We must never, ever follow the direction of any one else. When some spiritual leader comes with promises of proper leadership, we must note whether he points us to God and God's care, or whether he points us to himself, and his promises to lead. If he doesn't genuinely point us to God, then he is a false shepherd, a 'hired hand' to use Jesus' metaphor. We should run from him and under no circumstances follow him.

Why do we need the Good Shepherd leading us? Not only does He know the right paths to follow, he alone is able to protect us through the darkest valleys of life. He alone can protect us from harm. The expression "darkest valley" underscores the dangers to the sheep in ancient Palestine as they moved from one pasture to another in the mountains of the hill country of central Judea. In the dark shadows were predatory animals just waiting to pounce on a sheep and kill it. The dangers were real. But the shepherd had his 'rod,' which was a club used to drive off such animals who threatened his flock. He also had his 'staff,' which he used to keep the flock together during their trek through the dark shadows. He could protect his sheep if they stayed together during these times of danger. Were one of them to stray from the flock, they were prime targets of the wolves and bears lurking in the shadows.

⁹The verses develop primarily the role of the shepherd with respect to his sheep, but at a secondary level they elaborate still further the echoes of the Exodus. Thus the "meadows" (תּוֹאֵן) appear to recall the "holy" (הַקֹּדֶשׁ: Exod 15:13) which was the immediate goal of the Hebrews in their Exodus from Egypt. (Note also that the verb לָהֲגֵן, "to guide," is used both in Exod 15:13 and Ps 23:2). The "placid waters" (literally, "waters of": תּוֹחַנֵם, an intensive plural) may recall the "resting place" or "placidity" (הַחֲנוּמָה) associated with the ark in the wilderness wanderings (Num 10:33). The climactic point in vv 2–3, "for his name's sake," also associates the metaphor with the Exodus, as is indicated by the use of the same expression in Ps 106:8 in the context of the deliverance from Egypt." [Peter C. Craigie, vol. 19, *Word Biblical Commentary : Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 208]

¹⁰For example, Isa. 56:11b-12 (NRSV): 11b The shepherds also have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, to their own gain, one and all. 12 "Come," they say, "let us get wine; let us fill ourselves with strong drink. And tomorrow will be like today, great beyond measure."

Thus the sheep expresses confidence in the shepherd's leadership. Even in the spots of danger he will 'fear no evil' because he knows his shepherd will take care of him and protect him along with the flock.

What a challenge to us? We can know that God will lead us through the hardest moments of life. He will see us through all of these. He will protect us from harm, if we stay with Him and stay together as His people.¹¹ These dark valleys become opportunities for growing trust and confidence in God. They give us unusual opportunity to experience directly God's leadership and protection of us.

Thus we come to worship our God as our Good Shepherd. Today we celebrate His provision and protection of us. He has taken care of us throughout our life and so we rejoice in His goodness.

II. God is our Host, vv. 5-6

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 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.

The second image of Psalm 23 also comes out of ancient Israelite life. The image is fascinating. God stands as the ultimate Host, who invites His people to dine with Him in His palace. Most likely David is reflecting on the nightly meals that took place in the royal palace in Jerusalem. He provided for his invited guests abundant food and drink. And many of these guests were government officials who lived in the palace. But this image of hosting a banquet has a special spiritual image to it, for the dining takes place in God's house, the tabernacle or, later on, the temple in Jerusalem. And so later readers of this text would see the double reflection of the image and find in it a special richness of meaning. The ancient middle eastern customs of good hosting of a banquet are echoed in the details.

Now the psalmist narrates from the viewpoint of a guest invited to a banquet of thanksgiving provided by God Himself. What kind of host is our God?

As a welcoming host, v. 5.

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

Ancient middle eastern banquets allowed for uninvited guests to show up. But they were only permitted to watch the invited guests dine at the food table. David reflects, perhaps after his return to the palace in Jerusalem upon the defeat of Absalom in his rebellion against David. His enemies would sometimes be present, but would have to watch as only the invited guests were permitted to dine with the king. This was a powerful affirmation of the invited guests as the true friends of the king. Also customary in that ancient setting was a welcoming ceremony in which the guests as they arrived were anointed with scented oils. This covered the body odors and filled the banquet hall with pleasant smells during the banquet. Such welcoming by the host was considered very important. The host then had abundant food brought out to serve the guests. The cup of wine never was allowed to run dry. The king provided royally for his guests.

This image is of God's abundant provision for His people. Ancient Israelites were reminded in their festivals and in their worship that God had indeed brought them into a land 'flowing with milk and honey' where they had abundant provision. God kept His promise to Abraham to give his descendants the Land of Promise where they could enjoy a good living. In truth, their existence in the Promised Land was indeed like setting at the banquet table of the King of all Kings. They were blessed beyond measure. And their celebration of this in worship was to be a continual reminder of God's blessings.

The Good Shepherd, Jesus, declares (Jn. 10:9-10, NRSV), "9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." Through Christ as our Good Shepherd we have discovered abundant life, and life that never ends.

We come then to celebrate God's abundant provision for us.

¹¹"In general, testing and temptation are facts within God's world and constitute some of the tools through which he is bringing to fulfillment his redemptive purpose. Both trials (as revealing and stimulating character and progress) and temptations (understood as allurements to evil) may minister to the divine purpose, provided the outcome is positive (James 1:12). But there is this important distinction: since temptation embodies incitement to evil, it cannot be God's doing (James 1:13). Hence the tendency of the biblical writers is to say that while God sustains his people during testing (Rom 5:3; Rev 3:10), he delivers them from temptation (1 Cor 10:13; 2 Peter 2:9). What is true in the private experiences of individuals is also true in the history of salvation in which the testing of Abraham (Gen 22:1), Israel (Psalm 66:8-12), or Christ (Heb 2:17-18) contributed to the furtherance of God's saving purpose." [Alex R.G. Deasley, "Temptation, Test," *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, online]

As a generous host, v. 6.

6 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.

The generosity of God as Host is seen in the last verse of the psalm. The banquet continues on, and eventually the king says to his guests, “Why don’t you just move in with me, so we can dine together every night.” The host has received the absolute ultimate invitation from the king. So the guest goes home, packs his bags, and returns to the palace to live with the king. He will live out his remaining days on earth with the king.¹²

But in the spiritual application, the palace of the king is actually the ‘house of the Lord,’ the temple in Jerusalem for later Israelites.¹³ What a wonderful image of how God cared for His people Israel.

It reminds us of how God cares for us as believers in the New Covenant under Jesus Christ. He gives us abundant life now, and the promise of eternal life after death. Most excitedly, we look forward to another banquet that will take place in Heaven. John described it in Rev. 19:5-9 (NRSV):

5 And from the throne came a voice saying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great.” 6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder peals, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, **for the marriage of the Lamb has come**, and his bride has made herself ready; 8 to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure”— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. 9 And the angel said to me, “Write this: **Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.**” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.”

We have an invitation, folks. And it’s to the greatest banquet to ever take place in all of human history. Are you ready to go?

CONCLUSION

Psalm 23. What a wonderful affirmation of who our God is, and how He provides for His people. Truly, we can understand why Psalm 23 has been such an important part of the public worship of God’s people over the ages.

Let us celebrate today God’s goodness to us!

¹²“The Hebrew phrase ‘length of days’ at the end of the verse is taken by most to mean ‘a very long time,’ ‘as long as I live’ (TEV, FRCL, GECL; see 21:4; 91:16). NJV has “for many long years,” NJB “for all time to come,” and SPCL “and in your house, O Lord, I will live always.” [Robert G. Bratcher and William David Reayburn, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms*, Helps for translators (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 236]

¹³“*The house of the Lord* is most probably a reference to the Temple. The meaning of the psalmist’s declaration is that he wants to worship Yahweh in the Temple all his life or, in an extended sense, always to experience Yahweh’s presence and power with him.” [Robert G. Bratcher and William David Reayburn, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms*, Helps for translators (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 235]