

Psalm 23:1-3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/ps/ps-23/psalm-231-3/>

David acknowledges the sovereignty of God, His protection and guidance, and the effects of His presence in a communal proclamation of worship.

Like many others in The Book of Psalms, the 23rd chapter is explicitly described as *David's*. The word for *psalm* in Hebrew, “mizmor,” means melody. It is a poem set to music; a song.

David begins this psalm with the proclamation, *The Lord is my shepherd*. The name of God, (in Hebrew “Yahweh”), is translated here as *The Lord*, as it often is in Scripture. Yahweh means “The Existing One” (or “self-existent; eternal”). In Jewish tradition, the name was unpronounced. It is an acknowledgement of God as the sole deity, the sole reality. Judaism is largely considered the first monotheistic religion. So, this acknowledgement of Yahweh as the one, true Existing One is a significant statement in and of itself. One the original audience would have heard as something powerfully distinct in a world dominated by polytheism.

A *shepherd* was a familiar and significant image in both the culture and religion of the Jewish people. It was a ready metaphor in their time. The agriculture-based society was familiar with the role of shepherds, to guide and protect the sheep. The shepherd sees more, knows more, than the sheep. They'd be lost and endangered without him, even if they do not understand or like his correction.

The religious history of Judaism (and its offspring, Christianity) contains many characters that served as shepherds. The first is Abel (Genesis 4:2), who brought the first of his flock as an offering to God. Rachel, the daughter of Laban, was charged with tending the flock. It became the responsibility of Jacob (later renamed Israel), who married Rachel, and then his twelve sons (who became the twelve tribes of Israel), most notably Joseph (Genesis 29-30). Some later descendants were also shepherds. Moses the lawgiver tended the flock (Exodus 3) and so did King David (1 Samuel 16-17).

The implication of having a *shepherd* is that we, as humans, are like sheep. This is an important part of the metaphor. Sheep are known as some of the least intelligent, neediest of livestock. They have a very limited capacity to know what's in their best interest, and therefore are in greater need of guidance than other animals. Sheep also have virtually no ability to defend themselves. They are too slow to flee, and have no real capacity to fight. This demonstrates that, compared to God, we as humans are exceedingly limited, frail, and dependent. This psalm is largely about adopting a mindset, and part of the metaphor is an admission of our dependence. It echoes the Lord's Prayer, which acknowledges extreme dependence, when we are taught to pray:

“Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11).

So, this statement *the Lord is my shepherd* in the psalm is a practical one: God guides and protects those who are limited and dependent. It is also an acknowledgment that He is the ultimate leader and protector. All of the forefathers who led Israel (Abraham, Moses, etc.) were in service to God, the ultimate guide.

The next line in David's melody, *I shall not want*, is an expression of contentment. The word *shall* is inserted to help in translation, but the Hebrew might be more properly translated as "I want not", or "I lack nothing." This can be viewed as David choosing a perspective, rather than reacting to a feeling. David is declaring a reality. He is choosing a perspective to inform his actions, rather than reacting to emotions or appetites.

This is not talking about *want* in the way our human flesh has desires. This verse is not suggesting *The Lord* will cause us to stop hungering or end desire. It is a statement about need. With God as *shepherd*, we have what is needed. We lack nothing that matters. We have everything that is essential. Another way to state this might be "With the Lord as my shepherd, whatever I have is all that I need."

One of the significant roles of the shepherd is upholding boundaries. He uses the hook of his staff to pull a sheep away from danger. It may not be what the sheep wants. But it is what the sheep needs (and ultimately what it truly desires). The sheep lacks sufficient perspective to actually know what is in its best interest. So, the boundary-keeping shepherd actually helps bring peace.

The shepherd *makes me lie down in green pastures*. By having a guide, a protector, a shepherd who knows better than I, who keeps better than I, looking after me, it allows an enhanced amount of freedom and peace.

The phrase *green pastures* comes from two Hebrew words. "Dese" is most often translated as "grass" and "na'a" means "habitation" or "home," sometimes "pasture." So, the heart behind the wording is "grassy habitat," a soft and comfortable home. The verb translated *makes me lie down* indicates an open-ended, continual action. The idea is that the shepherd constantly and consistently leads the sheep to places of nourishment, sustenance, and benefit. Again, the idea is "wherever I am, that is what is best for me." The fact that David writes this as a song to be sung is an indication that his intent is to create a mindset, to choose a perspective that is true, but does not come naturally.

The term for *lie down* is "rabas." This is the Hebrew word for when a four-legged animal tucks/folds their legs under their torso and rests on top of them. Another farming/agricultural illustration that would be very familiar to the time. An animal only does this when it is full from feeding and feels safe and provided for. The idea is that "Wherever I am, whatever my circumstances, I am fully provided for, regardless of appearances."

He (the shepherd) leads me beside quiet waters. The shepherd not only provides rest in the form of *green pastures*, but rest in provision. He guides, or *leads*, to still *waters*. Sheep are said to fear running water, so they might not drink from a stream. By leading them to *quiet waters*, the

shepherd allows the sheep to drink in peace. To drink in a way that it can bear. The idea here might echo the New Testament verse that states:

“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”
(1 Corinthians 10:13)

Quiet waters might picture God meeting us where we are, never testing us beyond what we are able to bear. The provision of the *green pasture* is a picture that we always have what we need, regardless of how circumstances might appear. The calm of the *quiet waters* shows that God will provide in a way that will impact us. He will provide a means of escape, that we might be able to bear difficulty. By acknowledging this reality, and choosing this perspective, David is able to rest in peace. The peace goes with David. The rest is not in the location or the situation. Or level of activity. It is in the guide.

In this way, David expounds, *he restores my soul*. The Hebrew for *restores* is “sub,” literally “return” or “turn back.” He brings us to life, away from weariness, dread, and destruction. He gives us back our *soul*. The word *soul*, “nepes,” much like the Greek “psuche,” means the whole of a person. It can be translated as life, spirit, fullness of emotions, and/or activity of the self. It encompasses all these things. The whole person. The *shepherd* guides us to rest, fulfillment, and restoration, allowing us to live the life we are created to steward, the existence we truly long for—one of peace and meaning.

This is regardless of circumstances. Our wellness is rooted in the spiritual dimension. It supersedes physical realities. Our true and deepest needs are always met, if we follow our Shepherd, and acknowledge His provision. But this requires a choice of mindset, which is the purpose of the psalm. Choosing this mindset allows us to live above the circumstances.

These first three verses of Psalm 23 can be taken as a section. And that section concludes with, *He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake*. David has praised God for stillness, restoration, and now activity. He *guides in paths of righteousness*. This means God helps usher us toward right activity, built on the foundation of His lordship, the safety of His protection, and His restoration of our soul (life). The word for path is “ma’gal.” It means “entrenchment” or “track.” An established way. So, what God is doing here is aligning the life of the psalmist (and each of us) with the entrenched/established *path* of goodness. The shepherd’s goal is not to escort the sheep to wherever they want to go, which is likely to harm themselves. It is to *guide* them to the place that is in their best interest.

The Apostle Paul asserts that our ultimate best interest is to be conformed to the image of Christ. This is a divine purpose that supersedes physical realities. As he wrote:

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn

among many brethren.”
(Romans 8:28-29)

God is like a shepherd, causing everything that comes into our life, every circumstance, to work for the “good” of being “conformed to the image of His Son.” We, like sheep, tend to misunderstand what is for our best, and tend to prioritize seeking physical comfort. God knows what is for our best and allows difficulties into our lives so that we can be fulfilled in our “purpose.”

All of this *for His name’s sake*. The purpose (*sake*) of our life is for the *sake of His name*. God’s *name* includes His character. His full reality. God’s purpose for humans is for them to participate and bear witness to His kingdom and His goodness. Humans were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). God’s divine intent is for humans to be fully conformed to His image, *His name’s sake*.

This psalm, or song, is a choice of mindset, and includes a proclamation of thanksgiving for who God is. For what God provides. Individually. And for the communal purpose of all of life. By thanking God for what is, David orients his mind to accept that “whatever is in my life is for my best.” Gratitude is the pathway for accepting and embracing that God’s provision for us is always there, regardless of circumstances. God is always shaping us, molding us, conforming us into His image, like a potter shaping the clay. By choosing to be thankful for this, we arm ourselves with an attitude, a perspective, that allows us to receive all that comes into our lives with full confidence in God’s provision.

You will notice these first three verses refer to God as “He.” The second half of Psalm 23 refers to God as “You.” This suggests a communal focus in these next three verses. Talking about God in the third person suggests the presence of others, as if, in a way, David is explaining who God is to the community. Or, better said, that they are all, at once, proclaiming these truths together.

The second half of Psalm 23 refers to God in the second person (you), a direct communication between God and David. It is as if he is moving from talking about God to talking to God. Perhaps this is meant to be a progression. First we observe God, and accept the reality of His provision. We choose a perspective that “whatever circumstances are in my life are what is best for me right now, and an opportunity to be conformed to His image.” Once we choose this perspective about ourselves and our circumstances (as dependent sheep), we are now ready to choose a perspective about our Creator God, our divine Shepherd.

Biblical Text

A Psalm of 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.**