

“The Lord is My Shepherd” (Part 1) — Psalm 23:1
March 22, 2020 — Mercy Hill Church — Pastor John Ferguson

In light of our current situation when the novel coronavirus has the world’s attention, I’ve been doing what many of you have been doing—watching the news, trying to keep up with what health officials are saying, as well as gauging people’s reactions on social media. We’re having to figure out the “new normal,” and a lot of people have understandable concerns about the future. I’ve seen people handle these anxious times with humor, sarcasm, criticism, denial, and venom.

And yet, something Jesus once said about the people of his day is actually a perfect diagnosis for people in our day as well. In the Gospel of Mark, we’re told that Jesus and his disciples came ashore, and there Jesus “saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:23).

As I’ve been thinking about our flock at Mercy Hill in the context our community of BCS and the world in which we live, it seems good to me to direct our attention to Psalm 23.

It has been called “The Shepherd’s Psalm” due to memorable opening sentence. It’s been described as “the pearl of the Psalms” (Spurgeon) due to its ability to calm troubled souls and dry tear filled eyes. It has been simply described as “a masterpiece throughout” (JM Boice).

In our cultural setting, it is often heard at funerals, but as we’ll see, it is really “a psalm about living” — living in a world with all kinds of dangers, yet living with a sense of God’s constant, continual and comforting care.

So I want to invite you to join me in the upcoming weeks to reflect on this Psalm, because not only did Jesus read, pray, sing, and live this Psalm, but he also embodied it in such a way that we ought never to be able to think of this Psalm without immediately thinking of Jesus who called himself as “the good Shepherd”(John 10:14) and whom others described as “the great shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:20).

“The Lord is My Shepherd” (Part 1) — Psalm 23:1. We’re going to dial in on just the opening sentence, but hear the opening sentence in light of the whole Psalm.

The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want.

This Psalm was written by David, the storied shepherd-king of Israel. We don’t know if this was written before he became king or after, but we do know that this warrior-poet is drawing on his lived experience of a person who knows the care and provision of his Creator in such a way that he can be rightly describe God as his Shepherd.

1. “The LORD is my Shepherd.”

(1) Notice Who the Shepherd is: He is described as “The LORD”

- In English, we’re used to using the word “Lord” to refer to God, but notice how our English translation signals a deeper meaning for us: “LORD.” Whenever we see “LORD” in small caps, it’s signaling the Hebrew name, “Yahweh.” This is the God who made himself known to Abraham in a promise to bring salvation (i.e., blessing) to this world (cf. Genesis 12:1-3). This is the God who appeared to Moses to send him into Egypt to liberate Abraham’s descendants from slavery with the message to tell them, “The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (cf. Exodus 3:13ff). And this is the God that David recognizes as his shepherd, and this is the same Lord who gladly makes himself known to us in and through Jesus.

- So when David refers to God by the name of Yahweh, he means the Creator God who has bound himself with a covenant promise to redeem, rescue, and deliver this world far as the curse is found. David is in the middle of that story, and he's in the middle of trusting in this Creator God turned Redeemer God.

(2) Observe how the LORD is described: As a Shepherd.”

- Question: What comes into your mind when you think of a shepherd who tends sheep? For many of us, we don't have firsthand experience of this so we left to our imagination.
 - It has been pointed out that shepherds were often seen as outcasts from society. It wasn't a desired job, but something people did out of necessity and poverty. It was often dangerous work.
- JM Boice, “In Israel, as in ancient societies, a shepherd's work was considered the lowest of all works. If a family needed a shepherd, it was always the youngest son, like David, who got this unpleasant assignment. Shepherds had to live with the sheep twenty-four hours a day, and the task of caring for them was unending. Day and night, summer and winter, in fair weather and foul, they labored to nourish, guide, and protect the sheep. Who in his right mind would choose to be a shepherd?”
 - What David says here in Ps 23 is that *the Creator God has chosen to be a Shepherd who has by an act of humble, grace-filled kindness bound himself to shepherd him*
 - But it gets even better...

(3) Observe how personal this is: “The LORD is my Shepherd.”

- David didn't think of some far away deity who “is watching us from a distance.” Rather, David's lived experience was of the God of the universe as his personal shepherd!
- Others may look to other things like power or money or popularity or pleasure to shepherd them in this life, but David is content—thrilled!—to have the Lord as his shepherd.
- *My Shepherd is with me 24 hours a day, and his task of caring for me is unending. Day and night, summer and winter, in fair weather and foul, he labors to nourish, guide, and and protect me. That's the kind of Shepherd the LORD is.*

(4) See how relevant this is: “The LORD is my Shepherd.”

- The psalmist doesn't say, *The Lord was once my shepherd, but he has since abandoned me*. Nor does he say, *It would be great if one day the Lord could be my shepherd*. Rather, he simply says, *The Lord is—present tense, right here and right now—my Shepherd*.
 - IOW, the current lived experience of David is shaped by the every moment reality that the Creator of the universe, the one who spoke our reality into existence, this God—Yahweh, the Lord—is an ever present help (Shepherd) in times of need.
- Question: Do you know at a deep experiential level what David is talking about here? If not, I'm wondering if you might ask the question: Is it possible for me to come to know the Creator God as my shepherd like David did?

- If David could speak to us through the centuries, I believe he would say, *Beyond a doubt, yes! And believe me, you're gonna need it because this life is filled with all kinds of things that will make you anxious, scared and afraid like lost sheep, this world is filled with all kinds of dangers both real and imagined. You live surrounded by enemies—if not other people, certainly enemies like sickness, disease, and death. In fact, this whole life is lived in the valley of the shadow of death. And you need to come to know God in such a way that you too can say with confidence, The Lord is my Shepherd!*

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

(1) The English translation can be confusing. It almost sounds like, “I don’t want the Lord who is my shepherd.” I thought that when I first heard it as a teenager. That was before I knew the elasticity of the word “want” in English that includes the idea of “lack,” of needing something.

(2) Check out how these various translations try to clarify what’s being said by David:

- HCSB, “There is nothing I lack.”
- LEB, “I will not lack for anything.”
- ICB, “I have everything I need.”
- CSB, “I have what I need.”

- I think the CSB gets the logic of the verse with this translation. In other words, David is saying, *Since I have the Lord as my shepherd right now, I have what I need.*

Bottom Line:

The very fact that this Psalm has come through the centuries to us today means that it is supposed to become our lived experience too.

In other words, God in his kindness is offering to become for you and me what he had become in the life and experience of David, and countless others throughout the centuries.

Application #1: See this Shepherd in the face of Jesus.

1. **What David didn’t know writing some 1000 years before Christ** is that this Shepherd he wrote these powerful words about would come in near us in the person of Jesus Christ. *What David didn’t know is just how far his Good Shepherd would go to nourish, guide, and protect us, even laying down his life for people like us.*

- When Jesus saw that people were like sheep without a shepherd, it moved him to action.
- John 10:10, 14-18, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own accord.”
- John 10:27-28, “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.”

2. The Good News is that God has visited us in person. Jesus not only called himself the Good Shepherd, but was also described by the early Christians as the “great shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:21). And Jesus calls us to himself. Have you heard him calling you to follow him? He gives eternal life. Do you hear his voice calling to you personally to come to him that you may have eternal life? Do you see in Jesus the Shepherd laying down his life for you? If so, cry out to him to be your Good Shepherd.

Application #2: Memorize Psalm 23 as an anchor for your life.

1. Get this Psalm inside you. Memorize it as a way to transform your mind, to shape your soul, and to anchor you in the storms of life. I don't want this to be something nice that is read at your funeral, but something real that is lived out in your life.

- God, you are my Shepherd. Like a frightened sheep, I'm hearing things that scare me, unnerve me, make me anxious. Help me to remember that you are my Shepherd right here and right now. You have promised to never leave me or forsake me. Cause me to rest in the fact that with you as my Shepherd, I have everything I need to face this moment.
- Cf. Lamentations 3:21-24, “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’”

2. Harry Ward Beecher, “This pilgrim God has sent to speak in every language on the globe. It has charmed more griefs to rest than all the philosophy of the world. It has remanded to their dungeon more felon thoughts, more black doubts, more thieving sorrows, than there are sands on the sea-shore. It has comforted the noble host of the poor. It has sung courage to the army of the disappointed. It has poured balm and consolation into the heart of the sick, of captives in dungeons, of widows in their pinching griefs, of orphans in their loneliness. Dying soldiers have died easier as it was read to them; ghastly hospitals have been illuminated; it has visited the prisoner and broken his chains.... Nor is its work done. It will go singing to your children and my children, and to their children, through all the generations of time; nor will it fold its wings till the last pilgrim is safe, and time ended; and then it shall fly back to the bosom of God, whence it issued, and sound on, mingled with all those sounds of celestial joy which make heaven musical forever.”

David, inspired by the Spirit of God, composed this Psalm that invites you and me into a daily, lived experience of confident trust in our Shepherd-King that is at once intensely personal, thoroughly rational, and deeply satisfying.

What if Ps 23 became a lived reality for you and me?

What if the knowing the Lord as our Shepherd actually guarded our anxious hearts during uncertain times like what we now live in?

What if we knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus, the great Sheered of the sheep, laid down his life for you and me, and no one and no thing could ever snatch us from his hand?

**Mercy Hill Church, may you know the Creator God as your Shepherd
And Jesus as the Great Shepherd of the sheep,
And having him, you have everything you need.**