

Psalm 23: A Bible Study

Psalm 23 (NASB)

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.*

⁴ *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, 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 have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.*

⁶ *Surely goodness and loving kindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

The Lord Is My Shepherd

Despite the fact that many pillars of our faith – Abraham, Moses and David to name a few – were shepherds, shepherding is not currently one of the most popular professions. Parents do not lie in bed at night saying, “Oh, how I hope my child comes to me one day and says, ‘Mom, Dad, I know what I want to be when I grow up. I want to be a shepherd.’”

Throughout the Scriptures – in both the Old and New Covenants – God uses shepherding to illustrate His relationship with us. Our relationship with God is not horizontal; it is vertical. We do not ascend to Him as if to become gods. Rather, it is a matter of Him coming down to us. What a great act of humility! The Creator of the universe is concerned for us: a stubborn, stiff-necked, and rebellious people (Romans 5:8, Psalm 8:4). Just as a shepherd lovingly takes care of his sheep, lowering himself to them, our Lord also comes down to our level to care for us.

When we say, “*The Lord is my shepherd*” (Psalm 23), we acknowledge that we are His sheep, but saying it is not enough; our lives



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must reflect it. As we understand the relationship of a shepherd to his sheep, we can better understand God's relationship with us. The problem is that very few of us have any idea about the actual role of a shepherd. Grasping what a good shepherd does for his sheep – what it means for the Lord Himself to be willing to be our shepherd – will give us a deeper appreciation for how the Lord cares for us.

Do you acknowledge your belonging to Him? Are you willing to recognize that everything you have and everything you have ever worked for belongs to God? You are His steward, managing things for Him. Viewed through a worldly lens, this may seem like an unfavourable situation. The world tempts us to say, “It is all mine; I am not anyone's slave; I am free.” But that is what this is all about. The way sheep belong to a shepherd, God owns us and we must acknowledge that.

In Psalm 100:3, the psalmist wrote, “*Know that the Lord Himself is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.*” God bought us with a price; He has redeemed us. In Acts 20:28, Paul gave a charge to the elders saying, “*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*”

The Scriptures teach that true wholeness is achieved by surrendering to God's control of everything in our lives. Everything we have is His; He is in charge. However, psychologists and psychiatrists in the secular world often aim to guide their clients to stand in their own strength, assert themselves, and be subject to no one. They would say that self-reliance is the road to wholeness.

If we cannot submit to God's authority, we will never have true peace and contentment. Everything would depend upon our circumstances, which are continually changing. By acknowledging that the Lord is our shepherd and by

accepting His authority in our lives, we can find true freedom and fulfillment. With genuine gratitude and exaltation, we can proclaim as David did, “*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*” I lack nothing and have everything I need because the Lord provides it all.

During Passover, one of my favourite songs sung at the Seder is “Dayenu.” In the song, after describing each miracle God performed, the word *dayenu* is sung. It means, “It would have been enough for us.” When looking at Psalm 23:1, “dayenu” would be an appropriate addition; we can say without hesitation, “Adonai Roi, the Lord is my shepherd, and that is enough. Dayenu.”

I Shall Not Have Any Lack

In the second half of the first verse of Psalm 23, King David wrote, “*I shall not want.*” The Hebrew phrase “*lo echsar*” can be translated as “*I shall not have any lack.*”

If you review the various English translations of the phrase, you will get a good sense of the meaning behind what David wrote: “*I shall not want*” (KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV), “*I shall not be in want*” (NIV), “*I shall not lack*” (AMP), “*There is nothing I lack*” (HCSB), “*I lack nothing*” (CJB), “*I have all that I need*” (TLT), “*I have everything I need*” (TLB, Good News Bible, TEV), “*I don't need a thing*” (The Message).

In essence, what David is saying with this little phrase is that we ought to put ourselves in the position of sheep, with a total and complete trust in a shepherd to provide everything we need; and, therefore, we have no lack. It is a cause-and-effect phrase: Since the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need, and I shall not want.

The problem with this thought is that we do not like the idea of being identified with sheep. Due to long-held stereotypes, we tend to think of sheep as being some of the stupidest animals ever created by God. We view them as dumb and largely

defenseless! They have a tendency to wander into places that put them in danger. They require the care and protection of a shepherd, someone who will look after their smallest needs and who will lead them to where they need to be. This is not how humanity envisions itself.

Have you ever noticed there are no athletic teams named "The Sheep?" You do not usually think of courage and victory when you think of sheep. When the Lord called us sheep, it may be less than flattering, but it is certainly right on target!

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah compared our sin to that of straying sheep when he wrote, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (Isaiah 53:6). Just like wayward sheep, we have a tendency to wander away from the right path that God has set before us in His Word.

In our human arrogance, we want to be completely on our own, totally independent from God. We want to be able to sing as Frank Sinatra sang, "I did it my way!" And that, my friends, is sin! Just like in ancient Israel at the time of the judges, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

The Lord could have compared His people to any other created being on earth, and it



would have sounded so much more flattering. He could have compared us to bears because we think of bears as fierce and powerful. He could have compared us to foxes because we think of foxes as being clever and wise. He could have compared us to lions, creatures we think of as regal, courageous, fearless and brave. He could even have compared us to doves because we think of them as peaceful and meek. Instead, the Lord describes His people as sheep.

There is a bond between sheep and their shepherd that is not found anywhere else in the world. Once we recognize that bond, then we can admit that being called "sheep" is not such a bad thing after all! Psalm 23 provides a glimpse into the unique relationship between the Heavenly Shepherd and His human sheep. That is what David wanted us to understand, too. We are reminded in these verses that we

enjoy a special bond with our Shepherd. It is with this truth in mind that David begins with a simple lesson: Because we can say, "The Lord is my shepherd," we can also say, "I shall not want."

The Good Shepherd Restores Us

In Psalm 23:2–3, David tells us four things that the Lord, his shepherd, does for him, and by way of application, for us as well. In the first half of verse two, he wrote, "He makes me lie down in green pastures." The shepherd brings his sheep to a place of rest. It is important to notice that David wrote, "He makes me lie down." There are times that we, His sheep, are unwilling to stop and rest, and it may be that He has to strongly encourage us to do so. Lately, things have changed dramatically due to the pandemic, and many of us have been forced to stop and evaluate what it is we are doing with our lives. During this time, perhaps we need to ask ourselves, "Is this God's way of making us stop and rest and recharge ourselves for the future (the way a sheep lies down in green pastures)?"

In the second half of verse two, David wrote, "He leads me beside quiet waters." When sheep are thirsty, they become restless and set out in search of water to satisfy their thirst. If not led to a good water supply, they will often drink from a polluted waterhole where they pick up parasites and other diseases. They do this because they do not realize that there is better water elsewhere. Our Shepherd, the Lord, knows where the quiet, still, clean, pure water is found that alone can satisfy the thirst of His sheep. Additionally, the reason it has to be beside quiet waters is that sheep are afraid of water that is moving, so no matter how thirsty they are, if the water is flowing, they simply will not drink.

In verse three, David wrote, "He restores my soul." David believed that even those under the care of the Great Shepherd could need restoration. He knew what it was like to be cast down and dejected. He knew what it was like to be in deep anguish and despair. Sheep, like humans, can be "cast" down when their centre of gravity is off. For example, sheep will continually go to the same spot to lie down. As they get used to being in that place, they cause ruts in the ground, deeper and deeper until the ground starts sloping. As they lay down in these ruts and lean to one side, they slowly end up on their backs. Eventually, unable to help themselves, they start flailing away and kicking their feet, and they remain that way until the blood circulation to the legs stops and a loss of feeling takes place.

The only way they can be restored back to the flock is by the shepherd himself. He must go to the individual sheep, turn it over and massage the legs until the circulation returns. It is only then that the "cast" sheep are able to come back to the flock fully restored.

Just like the sheep, when we return to the same thing repeatedly and become too comfortable in our ways, we find ourselves in a rut. We can become cast down, dejected, and often find ourselves in deep

despair, unable to get out of the rut on our own. It takes the hand of our Good Shepherd, Yeshua, to pick us up and restore us back to His flock again.

In the last half of verse three, David wrote, "He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." Just like sheep who trust in a shepherd to restore and guide them, as we fully trust in the Lord unconditionally, He will lead us on the path we should go. Proverbs 3:5–6 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." As believers in Jesus, our lives are to be a reflection of the One we follow. As we allow ourselves to be led, our Shepherd will make sure we are exactly where we are supposed to be, with green pastures, clean waters and His righteousness – and we will be able to rest.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

One of the ways that we often describe intimacy with God is by calling it a mountaintop experience. We are in a real spiritual battle, and our enemy Satan will do anything and everything he can to make sure we do not get to where we want to go. Our path up to the mountaintop often takes us through the darkest valleys, with the greatest dangers, despairs and disappointments. It would be so much easier if a helicopter would swoop down and take us to the top of the mountain. However, God has not chosen that route for us. He uses the struggles we face in our lives to grow us stronger to serve Him. God, over time and taking us through some deep, dark valleys, draws us closer to Him, leading us up to the top of the mountain one step at a time.

David was familiar with the shepherd's annual trek, his sheep on the mountain ranges during the summer, and the pitfalls and dangers in the valleys. He chose to use the following metaphor, under the inspiration of God, to describe his own experiences of growing more intimate with the Lord: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me" (Psalm 23:4).

What is "the valley of the shadow of death?" Some say it is a real place – a steep, deep and narrow canyon. The sun only hits the bottom of it when directly overhead at high noon. The rest of the time, the bottom of the canyon is dark. It is purported to be between Jerusalem and Jericho and is the location of the actual road where the story of the Good Samaritan took place. Considering where Bethlehem is, David likely would have led his sheep through the valley of the shadow of death as he was growing up. Is that what David had in mind?

I do not think David was thinking of an actual, physical place. Instead, I believe the valley he wrote of represents any difficult life experience that makes us afraid, especially death. In essence, David was saying, "Even though I am going through this very dark, difficult and scary

situation, I am going to trust that you will enable me to get through this, in the same way that sheep trust their shepherd." Sheep lack good vision and are easily frightened in new circumstances, especially when it is dark. It is the presence of the shepherd that keeps them calm. Though it has become a tradition to read this psalm at funerals, this psalm is not about the dead; it encourages the living.

Before discussing the valley of the shadow of death, David had been speaking to the reader about God. He started out saying to the reader, "Let me tell you about the Lord. He is my shepherd! I shall not want. I do not lack anything." But once David got to this part about the dark valley, he changed his audience. Instead of talking to the audience about God, he began speaking directly to God.

It is as if David started to think about the tough times in his life, and as he did that, he ran to the presence of God. What a great picture for us. When we go through the difficult valleys of life – even today, as we go through the valley of the coronavirus pandemic – we should run to the presence of God and desire intimacy with Him. The only way to have that intimacy is by reading the Word of God and putting our faith in Yeshua, Jesus the Messiah. He promises never to leave us nor forsake us when we put our faith and trust in Him. I pray that you can lean on Him during the dark times of your life.

Comfort with the Shepherd

In the opening lines of verse four, we saw that, even through the darkest of times, we should not be afraid. Why? Because Immanuel, God is with us: "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me*" (Psalm 23:4a). More than 300 times, the Bible admonishes us not to be afraid, and it is often accompanied by the reminder that God is with us. As long as the sheep keep their eyes on the shepherd, they should not be afraid – no matter how dangerous the situation might be.



Now we move to the next thought in verse 4, "*Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*" The shepherd's tools of the trade, his rod and staff, give comfort to the sheep. The rod is a piece of wood that fits in the palm of the shepherd's hand and extends out about two feet. It somewhat resembles a small baseball bat. It is the shepherd's main line of defense for both himself and for his sheep. It stands as a symbol of the shepherd's strength, power and authority in any situation.

The Bible speaks of the fact that God will cause His sheep to pass under the rod. In David's time, the sheep passed one at a time under the shepherd's rod upon entering or leaving the fold so that they could be counted. In the evening, the shepherd would bring his sheep from the pastures into the sheepfold where the sheep could rest. The shepherd would lead his flock to the door of the corral, and then, one by one, name by name, he would tap each one of them with his rod and count them off as they entered the enclosure. If there was one sheep missing, the shepherd would become aware of it so that he might go out in search of the wayward sheep immediately.

In the morning, the shepherd would come down to the sheepfold, and the keeper of the pen would open the door for him. The shepherd would then call his sheep by name and tap each one with his rod as they came out to make certain that all of them left the fold. By taking an accurate count every evening and morning, the shepherd could determine when a sheep was missing. Verse 4 should then remind us that if we go astray, our Good Shepherd in heaven will soon be seeking after us. The Good Shepherd takes an individual interest in each of His sheep, and He knows and calls them by name.

The rod was also used by the shepherd for examining the sheep for pests and diseases. He would painstakingly use the rod to look under the heavy coat of wool to see if something was lurking under the surface that might give the sheep a problem.

The shepherd's staff, on the other hand, is uniquely used for the sheep alone. The staff looks like a huge question mark and stands as high as the shepherd himself. While the rod conveys a sense of authority, power, discipline and defense, the staff speaks of patience and kindness. In sheep management, the staff is used in three ways:

1. It draws sheep together into an intimate relationship with one another as well as with the shepherd.
2. It catches straying sheep by the crook at the end that pulls them back as they wander away.
3. With gentle prodding, it guides the sheep onto a new path or safely along dangerous and difficult routes.

While the sheep feel free from fear when the shepherd is with them, the rod and the staff are what keep the sheep in the shepherd's comforting presence. In this difficult and fearful time, I pray you would not only keep your eyes on our Good Shepherd and feel the comfort of His nearness, but also remember that He keeps you in His presence!

Blessing in the Midst of Troubles

Following the famous declaration of Psalm 23:4, "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no*

evil, for You are with me," David discussed how the tools of the shepherd gave him comfort. "*Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me*" (v. 4). In verse five, the scene shifts to a banquet – a feast where a gracious host, the Lord, provides lavish hospitality: "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.*"

The feast is taking place in the presence of David's enemies. The Hebrew word he used for "*my enemies*" is *tsor'rai*. This word's root is *tzarar*, which is also the basis for a well-known Yiddish word, *tsuris*, which means "deep troubles," or lots of terrible problems. The word *neged*, translated "*in the presence,*" literally means "right in front of." Thus, the Lord provides for us in the midst of the troubles (enemies) we are facing, and our enemies – the deep troubles we are dealing with – are rendered powerless over the Lord's provision. The blessing of the Lord will not be hindered in any way by negative circumstances. In fact, challenging conditions often enhance the Lord's blessing.

David's point was that the Lord floods – indeed overflows – our lives with blessings. He prepares a lavish banquet table in the midst of all circumstances. When our eyes are on the Lord instead of on the enemy (our troubles), the circumstances of our lives cannot keep the Lord from blessing us "*far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think,*" as Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:20.

While the world looks at circumstances as the means of blessing, the Lord usually blesses us despite our circumstances. There is a supernatural aspect to being a believer in Yeshua (Jesus) that we sometimes take for granted. The Lord not only helps us through our daily troubles, but blesses us despite them by supernaturally empowering us through His peace, comfort and contentment. The Apostle Paul called this blessing "*the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension*" (Philippians 4:7).

In addition to preparing a banquet for us, the Lord also anoints our heads with oil (Psalm 23:5). David is relaying that the Lord treats us as honoured guests. In David's culture, anointing the head with oil was an act of great respect by the host; it refreshed a weary traveller and showed him that his host loved him. But I believe David also remembered something else: his anointing as king. After King Saul disobeyed the Lord and did what was right in his own eyes, God spoke the following words to the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:1:

Now the Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons."

God set David apart as king when Samuel anointed him with oil. Although quite a few years passed before David actually sat on the throne of Israel, the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from the day he was anointed.

Just as God anointed David with oil, God also refreshes us with His Spirit. He exhilarates and invigorates us; the Holy Spirit is a fountain of living water, an unending supply. He empowers us, enabling us to accomplish what we could never do with our own abilities apart from Him. Whatever you are dealing with in your life, remember the reality of Psalm 23:5 and the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit that enables us to deal with whatever God has set before us.

Our Abundant Life

In Psalm 23:5, we looked at the importance and blessing of the anointing work of the Holy Spirit. Within that verse, David wrote, *"You have anointed my head with oil."* In David's culture, a host's anointing of his guest's head with oil showed great respect and love, and it refreshed a weary traveller.

The next thought in Psalm 23:5 has to do with the idea of abundance. At the end of verse five, David wrote, *"My cup overflows."* Some translations add the word blessings, as in, *"My cup overflows with blessings."* David was letting us know that an honoured guest of a feast will always have his cup filled to the brim, overflowing even, to signify how loved he is and the abundance he would receive.

Now let us examine the abundance that we are promised. Messiah Jesus said in John 10:10, *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."* Jesus said those words within the context of declaring Himself to be *"the door of the sheep"* (verse 7). In a sense, He was talking about the abundant material blessings of His saints.

Some churches today even have the word "abundant" in their names, like Abundant Faith Chapel or Abundant Life Church. Jesus did not mean the abundant life in only a material sense. Yes, the Bible does speak about an abundance of love, an abundance of grace, and even an abundance of blessing. But the one who said, *"For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?"* (Mark 8:36) did not mean only material blessing. There is a lot more to the abundant life than just material things. The abundant life enables us to be satisfied even in the midst of suffering because our focus is on the eternal God, the one who gives us eternal life.

As Paul pointed out in 2 Corinthians 1:3–5, the abundant life also includes an abundance of suffering as well as an

abundance of comfort in the midst of the suffering:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.

In Psalm 23:5, the overflowing cup is a sign of fellowship with the Lord. Paul, in Philippians 3:10, said, *"that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings."*

Speaking about the people of Israel, Mark Twain once said, "[They] are like everyone else, only more so." The same can be said of believers in Messiah Jesus. We are like everyone else, but our life experiences should be "even more so," according to Psalm 23:5: *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows."*

The table is prepared, and the feast is given in the presence of our enemies, which are all of our troubles, trials and tribulations. We are the Lord's honoured guests. He has anointed our heads with oil. The Holy Spirit of God not only fills us daily, but has taken permanent residence within us, enabling us to live lives pleasing to God. Our cup overflows. The blessings of the Lord are ours in the Messiah Jesus, even in the midst – or rather, in the presence – of a pandemic.

May we use the blessings of our abundant lives to glorify God and bless others (Psalm 67).

The Ultimate Eternal Blessing

Psalm 23 concludes with verse six: *"Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life."* I believe the English translation does not do justice to the Hebrew here. The Hebrew connotes the idea that God's goodness (*tov*) and lovingkindness (*chesed*) will constantly pursue the psalmist, regardless of the circumstances. God's blessings remain with His people no matter what – no matter how dark the valley, even the valley of a pandemic. No matter how we may try to avoid Him during difficult times, we need only to turn around and see that God's blessings are there, in constant pursuit of us.

Finally, verse six ends with, *"And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."* This last sentence is the culmination of the

entire psalm. It conveys both a temporal and an eternal meaning. The word translated *"dwell," ve'shavti*, also represents the idea of returning. It comes from the Hebrew word *shuv*, which means *"to turn or repent."* As David meditated on the Lord's leading and provision as his Good Shepherd, he recalled the fellowship he shared with the Lord in His presence, in His house. He also remembered how the Lord forgave even his most grievous sin, how God restored him, and how he returned to Him. I believe that is the temporal blessing. But the ultimate blessing for every believer is the eternal blessing – to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. For David, this eternal blessing was the proverbial top of the mountain.

Psalm 23 is one of the most well-known portions of the Bible for its deep meaning. It is particularly encouraging during times of trouble and sorrow. I have often meditated on God's words and promises in this psalm, and they never cease to bring me comfort when I find myself in a deep, dark valley. The shepherd's rod and staff comfort me because He calls me His own. He provides for my daily needs and gives me peace when I do not know what tomorrow will bring. He keeps me on the right path, and He helps me make the right choices so I do not wander away from Him. He walks with me through dark times, and He never leaves me. I never need to fear because He is always with me.

You, too, can rely on the truth that God is always faithful. You can count on that promise no matter what you go through. His mercy and goodness follow you; they constantly pursue you, even when you stray from Him. And He invites you to dwell in His house forever. All you have to do is receive this truth and allow Him to lead you as your Great Shepherd.

At the beginning of this study, I mentioned how one of my favourite songs sung at the Passover Seder is the song, "Dayenu." The Hebrew word *dayenu* means roughly, "It would have been enough." The lyrics convey contentment and the worshiper's gratitude toward God. When looking at Psalm 23, *"dayenu"* is an appropriate conclusion. We can say without hesitation, *"Adonai ro'i"* (the Lord is my Shepherd), and *"dayenu,"* that is most assuredly enough.



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