

# The 23rd Psalm



COMFORT, REFUGE &  
STRENGTH FROM  
THE GREAT SHEPHERD

SERMON STUDY - 3.9.2025

## Leader Corner

Pastures & Waters

Psalm 23:1-3

The picture of a shepherd and sheep is a common analogy in the Old Testament, most frequently used to describe the relationship between Israel's leaders (shepherds) and the people (sheep). Importantly, the analogy is also applied to God himself. The picture of God-as-Shepherd starts with Jacob in Gen 48:15 and 49:24, and continues throughout the Psalms (Ps 80:1-2) and the prophets (Ecc 12:11-12, Is 40:10-11, Mic 7:14). In David, all streams of the shepherd/sheep analogy converge. He is a literal shepherd who tends literal sheep (1 Sam 16:11, 19). As King, he is also the metaphorical shepherd who tends to the people (2 Sam 5:2-3, Ps 78:70-72). And as the author of this beloved 23rd Psalm, he opens by identifying God as the Shepherd.

In short, the Old Testament paints the role of shepherd both as a "man's role" (something that Israel's leaders are), and also as a "divine role" (something that God Himself is). Isn't it interesting, then, that this title is applied to Jesus throughout the New Testament. This study explores the opening of Psalm 23, and how it points directly to Jesus.

**Main Idea:** Encourage people to seek comfort from Jesus, the Good Shepherd of our souls.

**Main Practice:** Consider the Shepherd/Sheep dynamics from multiple angles and how understanding this analogy can shape your relationship with Jesus.

**Main Teaching:** Psalm 23:1-3

**As You Begin...:** Whether in professional or personal life, describe a situation where you had to lead, guide, or steer someone (or a group) who clearly had no idea what they were doing. Or the inverse: a time when you had no clue, and someone else had to guide you. What was that experience like? What did you learn about yourself?

## Connect with Prayer & Praise

Have someone in your group read the following Scripture aloud:

*"Blessed be the Lord! For he has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy. The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him. The Lord is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed. Oh, save your people and bless your heritage! Be their shepherd and carry them forever." – Psalm 28:6-9, ESV*

## with Practice

W. Phillip Keller, a shepherd, writes, "Sheep do not lie down easily and will not unless four conditions are met. Because they are timid, they will not lie down if they are afraid. Because they are social animals, they will not lie down if there is friction among the sheep. If flies or parasites trouble them, they will not lie down. Finally, if sheep are anxious about food or hungry, they will not lie down. Rest only comes because the shepherd has dealt with fear, friction, flies, and famine." This week, continue to sit with this Shepherd/Sheep analogy and help your group consider how this observation applies to Jesus as the Shepherd and you as the sheep.

## for Further Study

Believe it or not, this study only scratches the surface of the shepherd allusions in the Bible. For a deeper Old Testament dive that points toward Jesus as the Shepherd (and, again, emphatically shows Jesus is God), read Ezekiel 34:1-24 (especially v. 11-15) and Jeremiah 23:1-6 (especially v.3). These are things God says He will do Himself. These are things Jesus does. It couldn't be clearer who Jesus is.

## with Principle

1. As a group, read Psalm 23:1-3 together and discuss the key, biblically-based teaching points you recall from the weekend's sermon. What stood out?

2. Let's deep dive into this analogy. What does it mean for God to be the Shepherd and us to be the sheep? Here are some thought starters as you discuss this analogy from different angles:

•**Common:** Shepherding was viewed as lowly, undesirable work in David's day. How does Shepherd compare to God's loftier titles like LORD, Almighty, and Most High?

•**Value:** Sheep are bought with great price. The sheep 'belong' to the shepherd. How is this relevant?

•**Intimate:** Yet, as David would know, the dynamic between shepherd and sheep is not cold and transactional, but full of love, concern, and care. In fact, many preachers and commentaries highlight the relational, personalized language in 23:1 (God is "my" shepherd instead of "a" or "the" shepherd.) What are your thoughts on this personal, intimate aspect of the dynamic?

•**Necessity:** Sheep *need* the shepherd. They need endless attention and care. Left to themselves, sheep would wander off into the wilderness and die. How does this apply?

•**Humility:** As Spurgeon said, "A man cannot know that God is his Shepherd unless he feels in himself that he has the nature of a sheep." How is this analogy likely to connect with the self-sufficient or those whose pride won't let them consider themselves as helpless, fully-dependent sheep?

•**Capable:** The Shepherd must be familiar with the available pastures, waters, and how to get there in a timely fashion. He must also be timely in bringing the flock to a pen where they can safely spend the nights. How do these aspects apply?

•**Defender:** The role may also often involve fighting off enemies. Read 1 Samuel 17:33-37. How does David's experience prepare him?

3. "I shall not want." As a former shepherd, David knew that when the job is done well, the sheep lack nothing. When God is your Shepherd, then, how much more so! How can this simple observation help you recalibrate if you feel lacking? As you discuss, consider this quote: "Contentment consists not in the largeness of our possessions but in the fewness of our wants."

Verses 2-3 explore *how* the Shepherd sustains. Namely, that He provides the essentials for physical life (food, rest, drink) which restore the strength, or "soul," of the sheep, and that He provides good guidance, leading the sheep down the right, correct paths for the sake of the shepherd's reputation, or "name." There's so much that points toward Jesus in these verses! Let's dive in!

4. **Food:** With this shepherding picture in mind, and particularly with the idea of groups of sheep lying down in lush, green pastures to forage and feed, read Mark 6:30-42. Pay special attention to v.34 and v.39. How would you describe the connections between Psalm 23:1-2 and Jesus in this famous story?

5. **Rest:** Jesus isn't just the Shepherd who provides food for groups of tired sheep in green pastures, he's also the Shepherd who offers rest itself. Read Matthew 11:25-30. How does this connect to Psalm 23:2?

6. **Drink:** But wait, there's more. David declares that God-as-Shepherd leads him to refreshing waters. Read John 4:7-15. How does this connect to Psalm 23:2?

7. **Guidance:** David says that when God is your Shepherd, He also leads you down the right paths for the honor of his name and reputation. Read John 14:4-11. How does this connect to Psalm 23:3?

8. **Overall:** Let's drive the point home. Read John 10:7-19. Given this passage and everything you've discussed above, how is Jesus the Good Shepherd?

9. Referring to himself as the Good Shepherd is one of the (many) ways recorded in the Gospels that Jesus "tells us He's God without telling us He's God," so to speak. He inserts Himself into the "God slot" of the Shepherd analogy (Jn 10:7-19), while also setting the example, throughout His ministry, for how a man and king should lead (shepherd) God's people (sheep). The disciples pick up on this and continue the Jesus-as-Shepherd picture in their writings as well (Heb 13:20, 1 Pet 2:25, 5:4, Rev 7:17). Wrap-up your study time by talking about how you respond to this picture of Jesus as your Shepherd. Are you comforted? Excited? Amazed? Other thoughts?