

The lyrical beauty of the most popular psalm in the psalter is beyond debate. We love the imagery and the cadence of the Shepherd psalm. In times of grief and sorrow it's soulful rhythm brings comfort and assurance no matter what we believe. This is the psalm children memorize and never forget. Like John Newton's hymn *Amazing Grace*, Psalm 23 is a cultural artifact, a piece of Americana and a reflection of popular spirituality. In the prophet Jeremiah's day, the people of Israel were already using Psalm 23 the way many religious people do today (Jer 12:2) as stained glass piety instead of life-sustaining wisdom. The words of the psalm were on their lips but the meaning of the psalm was far from their hearts.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me, in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Psalm 23:1-6

Our aim is to take what is familiar, maybe too familiar, and draw out its true gospel meaning. Israel's Shepherd-King wrote the twenty-third psalm as a personal testimony and witness to the Lord's provision, protection, and abiding presence. David, the poet, the Shepherd King was right up there with Abraham, who was chosen by God to be the father of the nation of Israel, and Moses who was called to lead Israel out of bondage. All three were shepherds, literally and figuratively, pointing to the reality of the living God who was shepherding his people Israel. Psalm 23 recalls God's provision for Israel during the wilderness experience. The psalm is based on the big picture of God's Salvation History.

Our first concern is to pay attention to the redemptive flow of the psalter. Psalm 23 climaxes the preceding psalms and is best understood in the light of their meaning. Psalm 18 is a messianic/royal psalm dedicated to Yahweh's loyal love for his anointed king. This capstone psalm sums up the many ways God rescued David from Saul and subdued the nations under him. Psalm 19 is a hymn of praise to God in celebration of the testimony of God in creation and the revelation of God through His word.

These creation / torah psalms reset the worship life of the believer, re-framing our laments and struggles in the big picture of God's sovereign power and sacramental beauty and grace. Psalm

20 offers a deliverance liturgy on behalf the Lord's Anointed One and Psalm 21 celebrates the king's grateful response to Yahweh for answered prayer. In Psalm 22 the king is on the verge of annihilation. He cries out to God for deliverance, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Psalm 23 is the Spirit's response: "The Lord is my shepherd."

The person in the foreground in each of these psalms is the Lord's Anointed One. As we said earlier, these "royal psalms are often typological of the greater king, Jesus the Messiah."¹ Two horizons are in view: the immediate distress facing David and the long-range horizon of God's ultimate and everlasting salvation through Yahweh's Son of David. Psalm 23 is a messianic psalm that brings to a climax this sequence of redemptive psalms and celebrates Yahweh's sovereign rule as our Shepherd and Host.

The larger canonical context gives Psalm 23 special significance because its themes are echoed in the Prophets, the Gospels, and the Apostles. The prophet Isaiah likens the coming of the Lord to a shepherd who "tends his flock" and "gathers the lambs in his arms." He "carries them close to his heart" and "gently leads those who have young" (Isa 40:11).² The ideal Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 is the standard by which the false shepherds are judged as well as the revelation of the Lord's love and sacrifice.

Jesus builds on the metaphor of the Good Shepherd to distinguish and distance himself from the spiritual blindness of the religious leaders (John 9:39-41). He declared, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:11, 14-15). Jesus merges the metaphor of the Good Shepherd with the metaphor of the Lamb of God.

He used the Psalm 23 metaphor when he ministered to Peter following his resurrection. Three times he asked, "Do you love me?" And Peter responded, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Each time, Jesus responded by saying to Peter, "Feed my lambs;" "Take care of my sheep;" "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17). The call to "Feed my sheep," may sound mundane. Jesus didn't say, "Lead an army," or "Launch a crusade," or "Compete with Rome." He didn't even say, "Build my Kingdom." There is nothing triumphant or glorious about feeding sheep; nothing complicated or sophisticated about it. Yet this little command led Peter into the large world of God's life-changing salvation. What Jesus did for Peter set the agenda for what Peter will do for others. The apostles expounded on the meaning of being a shepherd in the Body of Christ.³

¹ Ross, Psalms, 491.

² Ezekiel delivers the Lord's judgment against Judah's leaders for taking care of themselves and neglecting the flock. By contrast, the Sovereign Lord is the true shepherd. He looks after the scattered flock, binds up the injured, strengthens the weak, and shepherds the flock with justice (Ezk 34:1-16). Jeremiah delivered a similar condemnation of Israel's false shepherds when he declared the word of the Lord, "'Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!'" (Jer 23:1). "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries," promised "The Lord Our Righteous Savior" (Jer 23:1-6).

³ Peter reiterates the God-centered nature of shepherding in three ways (1 Pet 5:1-4). First, shepherds are entrusted with a flock that belongs to God, not themselves. Their work is always a matter of stewardship, not ownership. Pastors who refer to "my people" ought to be mindful that the people belong to God and God alone. Second, the willingness to do the work of shepherding is inspired and instructed by the will of God, not by an ambitious ego or a needy personality. The appearance of godliness is no substitute for the power of God (2 Tim 3:5) and a reputation for zeal, apart from the will of God is worthless

The Lord Is Our Pastor

The psalm begins and ends with the Lord. The first word, Yahweh, sets the theme for the psalm and is repeated in the last verse. Everything in life centers on the Lord. The metaphor of the Shepherd conveys intimacy and fellowship, as well as guidance and protection. The little word “my” reveals much. The personal character of this relationship is stressed throughout the psalm. There are 17 first person, personal references (I, me, my).

The two images of shepherd and host converge in this psalm forming an “emblematic parallelism.”⁴ The conventional two-line parallelism common throughout the psalms is missing, but in its place is a diptych parallelism, two matching halves corresponding to shepherd and host. Like two panels of a painting the attributes and benefits of the shepherd find a corresponding description in the gracious host.

<i>The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.</i>	<i>[The Lord is my host, I lack nothing]. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.</i>
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The corresponding themes of the two halves of the psalm run parallel and unite the psalm. Shepherd and host are the two controlling metaphors, with each offering a unique yet shared meaning when it comes to provision, refreshment, flourishing, and security.

Wilderness Provision and Passover Delivery

The metaphors picture contentment. “*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.*” Green meadows picture God’s provision and still waters run deep and clean. The biblical roots for the imagery of the Shepherd’s provision and protection go back to the Exodus when God led Israel out of bondage, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. The imagery also points forward. In the miracle feeding of the five thousand men along with women and children Jesus commanded the crowd to sit down “on the green grass” (Mark 6:39). The reference to “green grass” in a remote place stirs the imagination in the direction of the Twenty-third Psalm. Jesus looked on the large crowd with compassion, “because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things” (Mark 6:34). The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) meets Psalm 23. The Lord leads us through the struggles, trials, and difficulties of life to a place of provision, security and peace.

(Rom 10:2). Faith in Jesus and the faith of Jesus are inseparable. Whatever is done in the name of Jesus is to be done the Jesus way. Third, all shepherds serve under the Chief Shepherd and their reward comes when Christ appears. The author of Hebrews underscores a similar truth when he calls the risen Lord Jesus, “that great Shepherd of the sheep” (Heb 13:20).

⁴ Ross, Psalms, 557.

“He guides me in paths of righteousness.” First, we are comforted and then we are challenged. We are commissioned to act according to God’s will. *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”* This is a psalm of confidence. We depend on the well-prepared, well-armed shepherd with his rod (club) and his staff (crook).

The metaphors change from the outdoors to the indoors, from work to hospitality. *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”* The imagery of shepherd and sheep moves to host and guest. The scene shifts to an intimate thanksgiving banquet. The modern reader may see the psalmist mixing his metaphors and juxtaposing two incompatible images, but to the psalmist, wilderness imagery and the Passover feast blend beautifully. David describes a picture of celebration, vindication, and exaltation. *“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”* This last line is a wide-angled view of life’s landscape and inscape, offering the Lord’s blessing from start to finish. Our true home awaits us. Home is not where we are from but where we are headed.

As a practical corollary, Psalm 23 describes what we should look for in a pastor. The word *shepherd* translates into Latin as *pastor* from which we get our English word pastor. Originally it meant “feeder” or “giver of pasture.” Jesus linked this psalm to himself when he said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). “The Lord is my shepherd,” bears the force of Psalm 110:1: “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” Both psalms are messianic Psalms: David, the shepherd-king, acknowledges that the Lord is his Shepherd. Our understanding of who a pastor is and what a pastor does begins here: “The Lord is my Pastor.” If the Lord is not our shepherd—our pastor, then no human pastor will ever make a very good pastor for us. No pastor will ever become a satisfying substitute for the Lord, no matter how hard we try; nor should they.

Some people want to experience what it is to follow the Lord Jesus vicariously through their pastor, but this practice is a poor model for pastoral care. Instead of living by faith, they want to see their pastor live by faith. They want to look to their pastor for the feeling of reassurance that the Christ-life is being lived out. The pastor becomes a symbol for living the life they are either unable or unwilling to live themselves. Instead of receiving God’s grace and taking up the cross and following Jesus, they want to listen to their pastor talk about the cross. Instead of using their spiritual gifts for God’s Kingdom work, they want to watch their pastor use his or her gifts. Believers can get by like this, but they never really experience the pastoral care of the Lord. They can never say, “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.” They are always needy, always wanting more, always frustrated with their lives and their relationship to the Lord. They can never say, “Pastor so-and-so” is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”

The Flock

The shepherd and sheep analogy has some limitations. Elementary school children choose

whether they are most like the lion, bold, confident, and strong, or like the otter, enthusiastic and entertaining, or like the beaver, practical, methodical and hardworking, or like the golden retriever, sensitive, calm and loyal. A comparison to sheep is never entertained as a possibility. In business, law, politics and sports, we identify with lions, bears, sharks and tigers. Can you imagine a sports team embracing sheep as their mascot? “As everyone knows, sheep are timid, insecure creatures, with little or no means of self-defense. They are not fast and there is no safety in numbers. They refuse to lie down in green pastures as long as they are restless or fearful. . .No other class of livestock requires more careful handling, more detailed direction, than do sheep.”⁵

The biblical imagery of the shepherd and the flock has been equated with the pastor and his congregation. Tradition has reinforced the notion that the shepherd pastor is actively in charge and the congregational flock is passively submissive. One leading church figure, John Chrysostom, seemed to take the imagery of the shepherd and the flock literally. He believed that those entrusted with the care of souls must surpass all others and soar above them in excellence of spirit. John claimed women and most men were ineligible for such a high calling. He said, “Let all womankind give way before the magnitude of the task—and indeed most men. Bring before us those who far excel all others . . .Let the difference between shepherd and sheep be as great as the distinction between rational and irrational creatures, not to say even more, since matters of much greater moment are at stake.”⁶ The dignity of pastors was so exalted that it was as though they were already translated to heaven and had transcended human nature and were freed from human passions.

The Reformation went a long way in correcting these unbiblical notions, but the distinction between pastor and people has persisted in the church today. Instead of an ontological or mystical superiority, there is now a functional superiority. The difference between the shepherd and his flock is not between “rational man and irrational creatures” but between professional and amateur or parent and child. In *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), Richard Baxter’s interpretation of the shepherd and flock imagery reinforces the importance of the active pastor and the passive flock. His daunting pastoral job description has persisted in the popular imagination of many Protestants. The pastor is called to serve “as every person’s evangelist, catechist, teacher, overseer, counselor, disciplinarian, liturgist, and preacher.” He must also minister to the sick, visit from house to house, and preside at weddings and funerals. For the most part, lay people “are essentially spectators,” or at best, third string players waiting for the chance opportunity to serve when the ordained minister is unable to perform his duties.⁷ For Baxter the metaphor of the flock is an apt description of a docile, needy congregation, dependent on the pastor for guidance and correction.

Surely the meaning of the shepherd and sheep metaphor is not to reinforce our timidity and passivity, but rather to declare our confidence in the Lord. Pastors are no more a substitute for the Lord than congregations are a dumb flock. This is the Shepherd-Psalm not the spectator-psalm. The point here is not the weakness of the sheep but the goodness of the Good Shepherd and

⁵ (Track down source)

⁶ John Chrysostom, II.2, p. 54

⁷ George Hunter, *Radical Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry and Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003), 105-107.

Loving Host. The secret of a sheep's contentment is not in its own nature but in relationship to the good shepherd. Psalm 23 sketches seven responsibilities fulfilled by Jesus Christ our Shepherd, our Host, and our Pastor.

1) Rest and provision for life:

"He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul."

2) Guidance in righteousness:

"He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake."

3) Comfort in crisis:

"Even though I walk through the deepest, darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff they comfort me."

4) Fellowship and protection through hospitality:

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

5) Affirmation for significant work:

"You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

6) Goodness in providence:

"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,"

7) Everlasting security in community and worship:

"And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

To say that "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," is to acknowledge that our primary source of *rest, guidance, comfort, fellowship, significance, goodness and security* comes from the Lord Jesus. Pastors make poor substitutes for the Lord, but they make great shepherds if they keep pointing us to the Lord. Their job is to guide us to the Good Shepherd. From these seven we can build a model of what a pastor does and what a congregation should expect in a pastor. The picture is not so ideal as to be unreal and each of these attributes of care is essential.

Congregations can be saved a lot of wear and tear, frustration and exhaustion, if they are led by a pastor who refuses to substitute his or her activist agenda or religious programming for the rest and nourishment found in the Lord. "Be still and know that I am God," will always be more important than a pastor's "five year plan." In this provision we identify the gospel. Green pastures, quiet waters, soul-refreshment depend upon the salvation and sufficiency of Christ. This is why we say with the apostle Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. . ." (Rom 1:16). *The Lord is our rest, we shall not want.*

A church guided "for his name's sake," will not be guided by the pastor's ego, but by the Lord's

authority. The Word of God, and not the spirit of the times, will determine the right paths to take. This is why we “proclaim [Christ], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). *The Lord is our wisdom, we shall not want.*

Being a pastor means you are never very far from dark valleys. Somebody in the church is always in their deepest darkest valley, but the pastor was not meant to absorb that pain as if it was his or her own. The congregation cannot afford to live vicariously through the pastor and the pastor burns out if the pastor lives vicariously through the individual brother or sister in Christ. With that said, it is helpful for someone to say to a brother or sister who is going through the deepest darkest valley, “The Lord is our comfort, we will fear no evil.” And often times it is the pastor who is called upon to say these very words, but we must not forget the essential truth of the priesthood of all believers. The resources of comfort in the Body of Christ are great. We remind each other that God’s grace is sufficient, for God’s power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). *The Lord is our comfort, we shall not want.*

Every time a pastor leads worship at Holy Communion, the congregation is reminded that only the Lord can set this table in the presence of evil. It is the Lord’s body that is broken and it is his blood that is poured out, not the pastor’s. Only the Lord saves and redeems. “For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all people” (1 Tim 2:5-6). *The Lord is our Savior, we shall not want.*

Pastors would like to anoint, designate, call, and empower, but that’s not their calling; it is the Lord’s. Pastors have their limits. They must not play god nor think that in any way they can substitute for god. They would like to make people’s cup overflow, but they can’t. Only the Lord can do that. Together, we seek first Christ’s kingdom and his righteousness, “and all these things will be given to [us]” (Mt 6:33). *The Lord is our King, we shall not want.*

Hopefully your pastor’s goodness perseveres, but often times it will falter or fail. There is not a pastor anywhere who does not regularly disappoint. Our frailty may be more noticeable than our faithfulness. But God’s goodness pursues us with dogged persistence. God doesn’t let up. God’s loving mercy does not tag along, as much as hound us. *The Lord is our goodness, we shall not want.*

Congregations know that pastors should not shape the church around their vision, their personality, their gifts, and their ego, but they often let this happen when they like a pastor. But it is not the pastor’s house; it is the Lord’s house. A long pastoral tenure, with an emphasis on the Word of God and an abiding friendship in the Lord, is a great gift to a congregation, but we must never forget that the house is the Lord’s house forever. Our security does not lie in a particular pastor, even when that pastor solidly and most assuredly emphasizes the rest, guidance, comfort, fellowship, significance, goodness and security that only the Lord can give. *The Lord is our pastor, we shall not want.*

In six verses of simple language and common images, Psalm 23 captures the simplicity, beauty

and depth of a personal relationship with the living God. Like a beautiful bouquet, this simple psalm, with its earthy imagery and timeless metaphors, expresses the commitment of a redeemed life, the contentment of a saved soul, the commission of purposeful actions, the comfort of a peaceful heart and the confidence of an everlasting hope.

Only Christ's Eucharistic meal does justice to the psalmist's imagery of the table prepared in the presence of our enemies. We are reminded of the fulfillment of the Passover imagery in the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). We hear the voice of the prophet Isaiah saying, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth . . . For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:6-7, 12). We hear the voice of the Savior saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." And then he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:19-20). We were meant to read Psalm 23 in the light of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant, brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen

Hebrews 13:20-21