



Psalm 23
“I Shall Not Want”

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We live in a society that prizes self-sufficiency. We all want to be independent, strong people who can take care of our problems ourselves and who don't want anyone to tell us otherwise. Babies are completely dependent on their parents, and part of what being an adult means to us is that we are dependent on *no one*: whatever needs doing, we can do ourselves.

Today we arrive at one of the most well-known psalms in all the Bible, the 23rd psalm, and while the comfort of this psalm is undeniable, in order to give us comfort it actually has to attack our idea of our own self-sufficiency and power. In this psalm, although others were chanting praise songs about his might and power, King David depicts himself as small and weak and desperately in need of God for everything he enjoys, all the comfort he finds.

This psalm is extremely personal—it's not *us* or *we*, but *me* and *my*—the Lord is *my* Shepherd. David rejoices in all he has in God : in six things in particular. So we're going to talk about those six things one after another, and then there are a few questions we'll need to answer. But let me say beforehand that since this psalm is so well known by most of us, it would be very easy to say, “Yeah, I know all this,” and listen passively. The problem is that even if we know that these things are true for us, *functionally*, we live as if we didn't: we read this psalm and give it a hearty “Amen!”, while all the while never *experiencing* the fullness of the blessings it describes. Brothers and sisters, it is not enough to know what the Bible says if we don't *live* it. So my goal today is not to give you new information about this psalm, but to encourages all of us to live it; and I pray the Holy Spirit will help us.

1) Provision (v. 1)

¹ *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.* In verses 1 through 4, David compares his relationship with God to that of a sheep with a shepherd. This image of a shepherd caring for his sheep is an image that would have spoken immediately and clearly to the agrarian culture of Israel at the time of David. David himself was a shepherd, and so understood both the needs of sheep and the care of a shepherd. But now he's king—he's come to the highest point of power in the land, and he is a mighty warrior. And yet he says that the Lord is his shepherd, which of course implies that he is a sheep—not exactly a flattering image. But, says Derek Kidner, “In the word shepherd, David uses the most comprehensive and intimate metaphor yet encountered in the Psalms, preferring usually the more distant ‘king’ or ‘deliverer’, or the impersonal ‘rock’, ‘shield’, etc.; whereas the shepherd lives with his flock and is everything to it: guide, physician and protector.”¹

In our day and culture, it may be easier for us to grasp this idea if we use a different image. Think of a father or mother with their newborn baby. The care of which David speaks here is very similar to the care a parent will show to their own child. A newborn baby depends on his parents for everything; he is entirely helpless, dependent on someone else to keep him alive and well. And his parents provide for

¹ Kidner, D. (1973). *Psalms 1–72: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 15, p. 127). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

every need he has. They care for him. They watch over him. They give him everything he needs. If the Lord is our shepherd, we lack for *nothing*. We may not have everything we *want*, but we will have everything we *need*.

John Piper gives this illustration. Imagine you're a parent, and your child asks you for a cookie. So you go to get your child a cookie, and find that the package was left open, and all the cookies are now stale and moldy. So you turn to your child and say, "I can't give you a cookie; it'll make you sick. Here's an apple instead." Now, the child will undoubtedly complain; he might even protest and say that you don't love him. But your depriving him his cookie is actually the most loving thing you could do for him—you can't give him what he wants, because what he wants isn't good for him. Piper said it this way: "God always gives us what we ask him in prayer; or, he gives us something better."

Whatever our situation, wherever we find ourselves, we can rest assured that we have absolutely everything we need—we want for nothing. Charles Spurgeon said, "Old age with its feebleness will not bring me any lack, and even death with its gloom will not find me destitute. I have all things and abound; not because I have a good store of money in the bank, not because I have skill and wit with which to win my bread, but because The Lord is my Shepherd."²

2) Peace (v. 2)

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.* The Lord, the shepherd, places his people in absolute and perfect peace. When Jack was a baby, we were nervous parents, mostly because we were sleep-deprived. We would do *anything* to create an environment of calm and tranquility: we made every effort to make Jack's room as calm and peaceful as possible, and if he ever fell asleep we moved like those guys in wars they send in to diffuse bombs, making every effort not to move a single muscle, so as not to disturb his sleep.

God isn't like that—he's not a nervous God—but David is expressing this same kind of peace here. God gives us his Word, and the promises we find there; and when we lean on those promises and remember the things that God tells us about himself, we remember that we need worry about nothing. God is never disturbed, never worried, never flustered; and those who rest in him can rest in his own lack of fear. His Word assures us of our peace, and the knowledge of his presence refreshes us.

3) Restoration and Righteousness (v. 3)

³ *He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.* When he says "paths of righteousness," he's talking about what life looks like for the child of God. When we are made his, he doesn't just save us, but he *leads* us, and leads us in a certain way: he restores our souls to be able to follow him, and he leads us *in paths of righteousness*. The longer the Shepherd leads us, the more we look like him. And remember the context: we look like Christ and learn to obey him *in green pastures, beside still waters*. These "paths of righteousness" are not a burden, they are not a chore—sanctification (the process of being made more like Christ) is one of the sweetest gifts of salvation.

² Spurgeon, C. H. (1993). *Psalms* (pp. 88–89). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

How often do we look at what God calls us to do and think about how much we will *lose* if we become more like Christ? How seldom do we think about all we *gain*? Men, something strange happens when you become a father, particularly if you have a son. You start to look at yourself the way you imagine your son *will* look at you in ten or fifteen years. You want to be the kind of man your son can look up to and imitate. Our Father, our Shepherd, is the *perfect* Father, and he leads us to imitate his Son. He gives us his Spirit to restore us, that we can become more and more like him. It is a *beautiful thing* to resemble Christ; it is a *wonderful thing* to see our Father's righteousness reflected in us.

But this reflection of God's righteousness doesn't happen so that we may draw attention to ourselves, that we may say to others, "Look how righteous I've become!" No—he leads us in paths of righteousness *for his name's sake*. Our ways are *his* ways, not our own. The righteousness that we cultivate in ourselves, the salvation we work out with fear and trembling, is *his* righteousness: it is for the glory of *his* name that we imitate him. Whatever progress we make draws our eyes and others' to *his* perfect righteousness. What God does in us, he does for his glory, and it is our delight and pleasure and peace to glorify God through our lives.

4) No fear (v. 4)

⁴ *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...* This verse is incredibly important. Up until now we could imagine that the Christian under the Shepherd's care has absolute immunity from any danger or harm or worry—and this is exactly what a lot of preachers say today: anyone who has faith in Christ, if that faith is strong enough, will see their problems disappear. And this verse directly contradicts that: it does *not* say, "He leads in paths of righteousness, so I will not walk through the valley of the shadow of death." It says, *EVEN THOUGH I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*. In other words, we *will walk* through this dark valley ("the valley of the shadow of death" can also be translated "the darkest valley").

So what kind of protection is he talking about here? Clearly he's not talking about protection from suffering or pain: David himself suffered great loss in his life, even when he was perfectly obedient to the Lord. And our experience tells us this is what life is like. When babies are teething, it's hard to watch. They say that the pain babies go through while teething would be unbearable for an adult. And it's difficult for a parent to watch their baby in that much pain for that long. But there's not a parent on earth who would choose to take that process away from their children, because we want them to *eat*, and not spend the rest of their lives gumming their food to death. God does not protect us from all pain because he *loves* us. But even in the pain, *he is still our Father; he is still our Shepherd*. He is still protecting us. He is still with us—not just ahead of us, leading us, he is *with* us, next to us—as Kidner says, "escorting us." We need not fear because we know that no matter how it seems, he won't let anything come to us that is not for our greatest good and his greatest glory. We will walk through the dark valley, but we have no need to *fear*. He is with us.

We *will be faced* with shadows. But the confidence of the psalmist lies in this simple truth: shadows can't do any ultimate, real damage to anyone. You can see shadows, they can surround you; but they can't destroy you. God's presence isn't going to keep us from going through the valley; it will free us from the

fear of the valley. *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will FEAR no evil.* As the psalmist said in Psalm 91.9-10, ⁹ *Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—¹⁰ no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent.* In the hands of the Good Shepherd, whatever occurs will not be evil against you, but good—perhaps incomprehensible good, but good nonetheless. And the basis of that confidence is given in the second half of verse 4.

...your rod and your staff, they comfort me. The rod was a cudgel worn at the belt, and the staff was a walking stick: the rod was used to defend the sheep from wild animals, and the staff was used for control, to round up the flock and guide them where they needed to go. Just this week I saw a news report of a family whose three-year-old boy was run over by a car *driven by a friend from their church.* Their grief is immense; the grief of that young driver is immense. So what do they know about God in that moment? They were able to look into the camera and say with complete confidence, “Our comfort is in knowing that God is a good God who ordained the number of days our son’s life. God has a plan, and we trust him, and we know we will see our son again.” They did not come out of this unscathed; they are hurting. But ultimately, they know are in the shepherd’s care. If you trust that what David says here is true, you know that God is standing next to you, fending off anything that can do you any ultimate harm, and guiding you where you need to go. Even death is not an ultimately fearful thing for the person who knows they belong to God, because that person knows that *even in death*, God is still with him, God still sets his affections on him, and God will not let him go. *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.*

Now, as Derek Kidner says, “It is one thing to survive a threat, as in verse 4; quite another to turn it into a triumph.”³ This is exactly what happens in verse 5. David turns from the image of a shepherd with his sheep to that of a host setting a luxurious table for his guests.

5) Abundance (v. 5)

⁵ *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.* Now, this is an image of a feast, we understand a little better. But we can see that in this case, God goes much further than a mere feast. At the time of David, inviting someone to eat at one’s home was an extremely intimate act. Eating and drinking in someone’s home established a bond between the two people, a bond of loyalty which usually ended with a covenant between them. Do you remember the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples, when he said, *This cup is the new covenant in my blood* (1 Corinthians 11.25)? That’s the image he’s presenting. Being invited to God’s table is an incredibly intimate exchange in which *he* serves *us*, and in which we are bound to him by the love he shows us: he covers us with his precious grace and gives us not only what we need, but much more: *our cup overflows.* There are no half-measures with God. What he gives us, he gives us *abundantly.*

6) Security (v. 6)

And with that, the psalmist concludes, ⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* Verse 6 is a summary of everything that’s come before. Our

³ Kidner, D. (1973). *Psalms 1–72: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 15, p. 129). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

salvation is so assured that we don't need to pursue God's goodness and mercy; *they follow us*. We have the promise that no matter what happens, no matter how frequently or deeply we live in the valley, every minute of our lives is goodness and mercy, and that will continue *forever*. We are secure in God's *goodness* toward us, forever: he is our gracious host who will never stop pouring grace after grace on his children. We are secure in God's *mercy* toward us, forever: no matter how undeserving we are of God's grace, no matter how many times we need to run to his throne to receive forgiveness for sins, we'll find that his mercy has actually preceded us there. We are secure in God's *adoption* of us, forever: we will live in his house forever, not as guests in a hotel or even guests invited by a host, but as the dearly loved children of a good Father.

And we are secure in all of these things because of the gracious life, death and resurrection of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. The provision he offers in v. 1 destroys our worry; the peace he gives in v. 2 kills our restlessness; the strength and righteousness he proposes in v. 3 fight our weakness and sin; the courage he gives us in v. 4 abolishes our fear; and the abundance of his grace in v. 5-6 puts our lukewarmness to death. In him we truly and eternally have all we will ever need.

7) Questions and Answers

As I was preparing this message and thinking about the monumental impact of this psalm on not only our own lives, but on the tone and perspective of the whole Bible, there are two questions that occurred to me—two questions that some of us may be asking. Because as we look at this psalm, it may strike us as a little *too* good...almost too good to be true. It seems that way, firstly, because the world around us doesn't seem good enough to accommodate this kind of language; and secondly because even as Christians, we haven't always had this kind of experience. So here are two questions some of us may be asking.

Firstly, what comfort can we take in the assurances that God is this good to us, while there is still suffering in so much of the world? It's easy to talk about God's perfect goodness and mercy and security when we're living in Paris, which (recent events notwithstanding) is still relatively safe and definitely comfortable. How can we, in good conscience, rest in the comfort of this psalm when we see so much suffering and tragedy all around the world? Now this compassion and discomfort we feel when we think about the suffering in the world is a *good thing*. We don't want to swing to the extreme of pretending those things aren't happening. But we need to be careful not to swing to the *other* extreme. Were we not to take this comfort, there would *be* no comfort: the world would either be the depraved stage of a masochistic deity's cruel pleasures, or nothing but chaos in which no hope for comfort is possible. Our God is a loving and gracious God who, for reasons only his perfect wisdom can understand, sees fit to let sin continue its course in the world, at least in a limited way. But the Bible also tells us that the suffering that grieves us grieves him as well—that his ultimate desire, his main goal which he *will* accomplish, is indeed to bring humanity to a place where there *is* no more suffering. And he proved that compassion by sending Jesus to live, die and rise again to save us. So the compassion inherent in this question is true and right, but we shouldn't let it make us bitter, but rather bold: the comfort we take in God's care for us should fuel us to share the gospel with those who don't know him, should drive us to the mission field, should provoke us to plant churches, should fill us with the urgency of love—an urgency which, despite what we may feel, God shares, and *proves*, in that he sent his Son at the right time to make atonement for

his people. Deciding not to take comfort in this psalm because not everyone can, would be counterproductive, for if we don't rejoice in this comfort, we would have no comfort to offer others.

That being said, we can arrive at our second question: What is the biggest obstacle to enjoying the comfort that this psalm provides? For most of us, our biggest obstacle is our burning desire to be self-sufficient. We want to see ourselves as strong and capable and equipped, and lacking nothing. (And if you want proof, ask yourself if you get irritated or angry when you feel like someone is treating you in a condescending way. Are you quick to say, "Please—do you really think I'm that stupid?" when someone tries to explain something to you or give you advice?) We have it when people are condescending to us, because we want to see ourselves (and for others to see us) as capable, strong, self-sufficient people. But the fact is that *all* of us are lacking without God, because for all of our seeming brilliance, none of us is able to escape death, and none of us on our own is secure in what is beyond death.

We've all heard stories of rebellious teenagers who run away from home and who suddenly are thrust into adulthood before they're ready, who are forced to shoulder burdens that don't belong to them and that they cannot bear. This is essentially what we have done: we have taken burdens on ourselves that don't belong to us, and that we can't possibly bear. We were never *meant* to be self-sufficient and all-powerful—the only one who can fit that bill is God himself. And when we nurture this desire for self-sufficiency, we force ourselves to shoulder burdens we can't possibly carry. If we want to truly *lack nothing*, we only have one hope: that in Christ we find everything we need. If we are to accept what the psalmist tells us, we must accept that we are *not* self-sufficient. We come to God empty-handed, offering nothing, simply asking him to provide what we cannot provide for ourselves. And if we do this, we find that the rest the psalmist proposes here, the comfort he offers in the truth that the Lord is our shepherd, is *ultimate* rest, *ultimate* comfort: it is only in recognizing that we are not self-sufficient that we find *in God alone* that which we were lacking. It is only in recognizing our own lack that we may really and truly lack nothing.

Conclusion

So as we close, I'd like to appeal to us all (myself included) to pray. If you're tired, there is rest. If you're afraid, there is comfort. And if you're not tired or afraid, rest assured: *you will be*. So let us pray that God would allow us to see our own lack, our own powerlessness, our own weakness, so that we might not imagine ourselves too strong to need a shepherd. Let us pray that he would bring us low, in order that he might raise us up. Let us pray that we may submit to his Son as the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep. And let us pray that we might *rest* in the glorious promise that if we belong to him, we truly lack nothing; that if we belong to him, goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in his house forever.