

Jesus is My Shepherd

Psalm 23:1 *A Psalm of David.*

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ 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.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

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."

Psalm 23

I Want

CAN THE BIBLE HAVE RELEVANCE to people who want everything but need nothing? It tells us that the One Thing

we need will cause us not to want. But we so often don't want the One Thing we truly need. Thus, we end up wanting the things we don't need. And we can't figure out why we are so dissatisfied with life when we have everything we could ever want or need.

What does it mean to “want” something? We use this word all the time. We often confuse the word for “need.” Your child says, “Mom, I *neeeeed* this!” What she really means is, “I want this.” As a verb, it means “to be lacking.” This comes from an old Norse word *vanta*.” Eventually it came to mean “desire” or “wish.” So, you wish for that which you lack. Consider the following from an unknown author:

The TV is my shepherd,

I shall want more.

It makes me lie down on the sofa.

It leads me away from the faith;

It destroys my soul.

It leads me in the path of sex and violence

for the sponsor's sake.

Yeah, though I walk in the shadow of Christian responsibility,
there will be no interruption, for the TV is with me.

It's cables and remote control, they comfort me.
It prepares a commercial for me in the presence of my
worldliness;
It anoints my head with humanism and consumerism;
My coveting runneth over.
Surely, laziness and ignorance shall follow me all the days of
my life,
and I shall dwell in the house watching TV forever.

Most of our wants in America are not needed, in the sense that if you don't have it you will literally die. Yet, we increasingly seem to want more of what we don't need. Why? It isn't necessarily a bad thing to want something, even gold or silver. David admits that he desires those and he doesn't say it is a sin. But it can be.

Think about the tenth commandment about desiring what belongs to our neighbor. It is a root of every sin. We want what they have that we don't have. As we want more and more of what we don't need, our evil hearts begin to pour out such unenviable things as greed and covetousness and lust. These in turn cause us to become ever more unsettled, unhappy, and insatiable as our desires get out of

control. Strangely, this makes us fuss, complain, grumble, and whine about all the things we do not have. Often, it makes us act out in worse ways. All of this is the exact opposite of the fruit of the Spirit that we find in the Bible. This becomes a viscous circle that just grows bigger and bigger. All because our wants are out of control.

In America, we have everything we need. Paradoxically, as our wants for things we don't need wax, we our want for what we do need wanes. Why? Either because we already have it and take it for granted, or because since we have all our needs, we don't actually feel like we need the need.

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 addresses our wants. “I shall not want” (Ps 23:1). This statement serves as the basis of the entire song. Last week we looked at perhaps the greatest overtly Messianic song—if not passage—in the entire OT. Today, we are thinking about what may be the most famous song ever written, and maybe even the most well-known text on planet earth.

Psalm 23 is known in our day as [the funeral psalm](#). In fact, I heard it read just this week at a funeral of a friend. You still hear it read even in movie funerals. This seems to have happened when the Anglicans added the Psalm to the Funeral section in its *Book of Common Prayer* in the early 1900s. Since then, even Jews have adopted this use of the Psalm. In earlier times, it is possible that Psalm 23 was used by Christians as [a baptismal psalm](#), [an ordination psalm](#), and [a Lord's Supper psalm](#). For example, [Athanasius](#) said, “[He leads me beside still waters](#)” is “[perhaps to be understood as holy baptism](#)”; “[you anoint my head with oil](#)” means “[the mystic chrism \[the consecrated oil used in baptism, confirmation, ordination\]](#)”; and “[you prepare a table before me](#)” means “[the mystic table.](#)”¹³ The point is, this psalm has been very important throughout the history of the church.

Curiously, the New Testament does not quote this psalm. That doesn't mean, however, that it does not use or think about it. In fact, the most important part of the psalm, and the one I want to take the most time helping us

¹ [Athanasius](#), PG 27:col.140, cited by William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 13. Cited in Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, [The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 416–417.

understand this morning—the first five words (two words in Hebrew)—has a very deliberate NT (and even OT prophetic) counterpart. “The LORD is my shepherd.”

The LORD the Shepherd

The word “LORD” here is Yahweh, the covenantal name of Israel’s God. When the world hears this line in the psalm—The *LORD* is my shepherd, what comes to their mind? For almost everyone it is the word G-O-D. “God” is a shepherd. And of course, this is certainly true.² Christians have One God, but we are not Unitarians. Our God exists in Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We worship the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit. When we learn to read Psalm 23 with the inspired writers of Scripture, suddenly, this become much more specific.

Augustine writes, “The Church speaks to Christ: ‘The Lord feeds me, and I shall lack nothing’ (ver. 1). The Lord Jesus Christ is my Shepherd, ‘and I shall lack nothing’” (Augustine, *Exposition on Psalm 23*). Someone more modern says, “When believers read the opening words of Psalm 23, they cannot help but insert the name ‘Jesus’ between ‘Lord’

² More true than many realize. See n. 5 below.

and 'is', saying, 'The Lord Jesus is my shepherd.' This is as natural for them as breathing."³ The question is, are Christians justified in doing this? To me, this is an extremely important question, because I do not believe that changing the meaning of the Bible to fit your theology is acceptable, no matter how good your theology might be. Therefore, let's see how this idea runs through the whole Bible.

What I discovered is that almost all references to the singular "shepherd" are to God. None of those are unequivocally the God the Father. Most of them must be the Son. The first instance of God as a shepherd comes from one who was himself a shepherd: **Jacob**. He said to Joseph,

"The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys."

(Gen 48:15-16)

Jacob identifies his "God" as "The Angel [of the LORD]." This is the person he said has been his Shepherd.⁴

³ Roger Ellsworth, *Opening up Psalms*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006), 44.

⁴⁴ He says the same thing in **Gen 49:24** but adds a phrase, "But his bow remained unmoved; his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel)."
Later, Christ will be both the "Rock" and the "Chief Cornerstone."

The next reference in the Bible to God as a Shepherd is Psalm 23. Several Psalms talk generically about the LORD as a Shepherd. Then we come to the **prophecies**. **Isaiah** foretells the Servant of the LORD, “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms” (**Isa 40:11**). **Ezekiel** says, “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David. My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes” (**Ezek 34:23**). This is future human Davidic king. **Micah** says, “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” Matthew says this was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. (**Matt 2:6**; cf. **Mic 5:2-4**). **Zephaniah** says, “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me,” Declares the LORD of hosts. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” Mark says this was fulfilled by the Lord Jesus (**Zech 13:7**; cf. **Mark 14:27**).

Every single NT reference to the Shepherd God is about of the Son of God. Jesus had compassion on the crowds “because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (**Matt**

9:36; Mark 6:34). On the Great Day, the Son of Man will separate people “as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matt 25:31-32). He said to his disciples in John’s Gospel, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11; cf. Heb 13:20). Peter calls him “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” because he protected us on the cross (1Pe 2:24-25; cf. 5:4). Revelation calls him “the Lamb in the midst of the throne [who] will be their shepherd” (Rev 7:17).

In light of all this, there is a remarkable prophecy in Ezekiel (whom we just saw in this same chapter prophecies of the Son as Shepherd) that takes the imagery of Psalm 23. “I myself will be the shepherd of the sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD” (Ezek 34:15). Who then is the “Lord GOD” that is speaking to Ezekiel? It is, as always, the Son-Angel, the only mediator between God and mankind.⁵ The same must therefore true of David’s

⁵ **Going deeper.** The gods of the nations are often called “shepherds” as well. Baal (KTU 1.12.II), Adonis (Virgil), Osiris with his crook staff, Tammuz (Babylon) are all called shepherds of the sheep. They are also all “sons of God” (rather than the Most High God). The place where this is most striking is in 1 Enoch 89:59 where there are “seventy shepherds” of the nations. Charles writes, “The ‘seventy shepherds’ raise the most vexed question in Enoch. They are certainly angels [which correspond to the seventy sons of God from Babel].” Robert Henry Charles, ed., *Commentary on the Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 255. Therefore, the imagery of the Son of God as Shepherd of Israel is perfectly natural in the Ancient context. For discussions see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*:

LORD. My friend, David knew the Lord Jesus in his preincarnate form. He knew him to be his God. He knew him to be his Shepherd. No one took the Bible out of context in saying that Jesus was the Shepherd. Rather, it is we who take it out of context if we refuse to admit that Jesus is David's Shepherd.

This matters not only because we want to be faithful to interpreting the word correctly, but because it helps us enter into the delights of this OT Psalm in a way that we might more easily do when reading the Gospels where Jesus is our Shepherd and we who have been born again are his sheep. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And he is the Shepherd of the sheep. Always. And knowing that he has always been so, even before he came to earth in the flesh, is a powerful aid to seeing him as your Shepherd today, even after he has ascended back into heaven.

The Sheep

An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature (Eerdmans, 2016), 87-89; and **Margaret Barker**, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 226-29. On the seventy angels see Deut 32:8-9; TNapht 8:4-5, 9:1, 2, 4; Ps-Clem, Rec. 2.42. These last two I discovered in **Francis T. Fallon**, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth* (Brill, 1978), 103.

But now we must turn our attention to the animal for a moment. Shepherds are nothing if they have no flock. Sheep. They were a mainstay of the ancient world. Thus, the image made good sense to use. Everyone was intimately familiar with them. Sheep were everywhere, and if you weren't a shepherd yourself, you might have worked for one or at the very least known many of them in your travels. As most know, David was a shepherd who knew personally what it meant to protect sheep and to be like one. Interestingly, shepherd was a profession that knew no gender boundaries. There are women shepherdesses in the Bible, and this makes the metaphor all the more powerful as all people could relate personally on both fronts to it.

Ovis aries is its technical name. These animals have become almost completely domesticated and are have been raised as livestock for thousands of years. Why? Because this is an animal that is completely helpless on its own, or even in groups. They have no natural ability to defend themselves from predators. Even more, they are very dumb animals. A sheep couldn't spot danger if it reached out and poked him in the eye. As such, they need protection to survive.

This is why having a shepherd is so vital to the well-being of a sheep. The shepherd basically takes complete and total care of his sheep. They literally want for nothing, so long as he is around. And this takes us back to the beginning. Sheep *need* the shepherd. It isn't a want. It is an absolute necessity. Otherwise, they die. The problem is, they are too dumb to know this truth. Therefore, you must enter into what it means to be a sheep, for, “All we like sheep have gone astray, each of us to his own way” (Isa 53:6). You are a sheep, and you need the Lord Jesus!

If you know this to be true of yourself, then know also that the Shepherd takes them, they do not take him. For they don't know that they need him. Once he takes them, they begin to learn his voice, and only his voice, and be lead by him wherever he should choose to take them. But if he should leave, they start to stray immediately.

The LORD My Shepherd

This is why it is so vital to know that *Jesus* is the Great Shepherd. “Lo, I am with you always to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:20). He will never leave or forsake us. But this is only true for his sheep. What is extraordinary about this

is that David would identify himself as a sheep when he was the human ruler God had placed over Israel to be its shepherd. “The LORD is *my* Shepherd.” If the king of Israel who was placed as a shepherd could know his place in relation to God, there is no reason why anyone here should do different. Therefore, as you enter into Psalm 23, the first question you are confronted with is **are you one of his sheep?** He calls to you now with the voice of the Word of God. Come to me, you who are weary and I will give you rest. Listen to his voice and follow the Great Shepherd and you shall want for nothing.

One more thing. Sheep are never by themselves. What I mean is, there is always a flock. There are many sheep and those sheep are together. There is a corporate nature to the image that is mostly lost on us in the west. The Psalm is quite personal, about “me.”⁶ But do not let it be lost on you that together we are God’s sheep. What he does for one, he does for all. Together, we follow him. Together, we are his flock. Therefore, he keeps us from wanting . . . *together*. And so help one another listen to the voice of the Shepherd, to uphold

⁶ See the outline below for the movement from the first person to third, back to first, then to second, and back to first. The effect is to move from the impersonal to the personal. The LORD becomes someone he knows.

one another in fellowship and prayer, lest any of you should stray away and perish.

I Shall Not Want

So, what does it mean to want for nothing? This is the question the rest of Psalm 23 answers. Looking at the outline of the Psalm is always helpful. It seems to form a fairly complex chiasm that consists of seven parts:⁷

1. First person ("I shall not want")
2. Third person ("He settled me down/leads me")
3. Third person ("He brings/leads")
4. First person ("I walk/I do not fear")
5. Second person ("You - with me/ Your rod/staff comfort me")
6. Second person ("You prepare/anoint")
7. First Person ("I will dwell")

Or:

⁷ Charts: **Kenneth E. Bailey**, *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 2014). 33-34. I am indebted to this recently deceased Presbyterian scholar for some of the discussion which follows.

1.	^{23:1} The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.	LORD - SHEPHERD No Wants
2.	² He settles me ^a down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.	FOOD & Drink
3.	³ He brings me back/he causes me to repent. ^b He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.	RESCUE Security
4.	⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, ^c I will fear no evil,	DEATH/EVIL No Fear
5.	for you are with me; Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.	SECURITY Comfort
6.	⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; ^d You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows	FOOD & Drink
7.	⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for the length of the days. ^e	GOODNESS AND MERCY LORD - House all the Days

We might also outline it like this:

- I. Christ the Pastor (1b-3a)
- II. Christ the Guide (3b-4)
- III. Christ the Healer (5)
- IV. Christ the Host (6)⁸

From these we can summarize that “The good shepherd’s primary duties are to guide, provide food and water, protect

⁸ Samuel L Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 238.

and deliver, gather back to the herd those that were lost, and to nurture and provide security.”⁹ Food and water, safety and guidance. These are the basic needs of life. And the Lord Jesus is the one who gives these things to his sheep.

He Makes Me Lie Down

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. The green pastures are the place where the sheep graze. It is where they eat. It is their food. The still waters are likewise where they drink to their hearts content. It is also quite rare in Israel. Only three of the twelve months have green pastures. Much the same as we have down here on the front range. Therefore, it is a treat that is being given.

This would all take place in the heat of the day. In a desert, the sheep go up to higher, greener, cooler pastures. Perhaps the higher slopes around Jerusalem or on Mt. Hermon up north. Here in Colorado, I think of the gorgeous grasses at the foot of the Maroon Bells, where you will find from time to time mountain goats grazing. It is

⁹ **Beatrix Thomasia Pias Kahlasi**, “Jesus as the Good Shepherd in John’s Gospel” (Lisboa, 2015), 5.

serene. It is calm. It is peaceful. It is the place where the soul delights. When you have you fill of food, a moderately running stream being fed by glacial waters high above satisfies. Down in the desert, it cools and gives relief from the heat of the scorching sun.

Therefore, the Good Shepherd on behalf of his Loving Heavenly Father sends his sheep out to pasture for their delight. He gives them their food and water which sustains them, brings them into covenant, and keeps they fueled in it. He gives them spiritual food and water that cleans them and nourishes their souls. He is the Water of Life, and all who drink from him will never thirst. He is the Manna of heaven, and all who eat of his flesh shall never hunger.

The point is, Christ takes us to the places where we can get our food and water so that we might grow and thrive. He gives us jobs that we might put bread on the table. He gives us the church, where we might feast upon the Word. He sends us one another where we might pasture together.

But **there is also danger**. Our Savior takes us into the open range, where there is as Bailey puts it, no police protection. **Nerses the Graceful** of Lambron (1526 AD) connects it to the previous psalm, **“I wandered in the midst**

of beasts, dogs, and bulls (that) surrounded me; lions opened their mouths and wished to ravish me. I was terrified, and because of fear I made a treaty with the Savior. Therefore, do not be afraid, O my soul, for HE is my shepherd, and ‘I shall not want’” (Nerses, *On Psalm 23*).

The “not wanting” is actually pictured in the verb “to lie down.” You can train a dog to lie down. You can’t make a sheep lie down. Sheep only lie down when they have had their full and when they are not threatened by wild animals. He also “leads” us. He does not beat us. What sense would that even make, knowing where he is taking us? He leads with his voice or by a song, out in front, and his sheep are eager to follow the voice of their Savior. Our Lord therefore brings us peace during turmoil, rest amid strife, hope in the midst of hopelessness, and nourishment when we are surrounded by starvation. What a delightful way to show us how loving gifts and strong protection.

He Restores My Soul

He Restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his Name’s sake. Even when the shepherd is present, he may

have such a large flock or get so overwhelmed with this problem or that, and some sheep might find himself wandering away from the group. This is what we have in the next two lines. In fact, the theme continues for several more.

From the normal translation you might not see it. The KJV's "restoring my soul" might make you think of the previous lines, and the sudden contentment the sheep has from food and water. It might make us want to spiritualize our problems. Perhaps you have been depressed and the Lord has helped you "feel" better or something. The verb here is the word *shub*, the usual word for "repent" which is in some ways better rendered "to turn." Hence, the idea he turns/returns me or "he brings me back" (*epistrepho* in the LXX). The idea is that the sheep has gotten itself into some kind of danger, and the shepherd is running after it to turn it away from the deep ravine or the thicket or the beast that lay just beyond the turn. A common picture is that of the Shepherd carrying the sheep on his back, taking it out of danger all by himself.

In this way, it is not so much our feelings as it is our actions that are being turned. Indeed, it is our sinfulness that

is in mind. Sin is why we need to repent and turn back to the Shepherd. But he returns us! What good news this is for souls weary of constantly trying to turn themselves, like a sheep caught in a thorn bush, to no avail, or perhaps even to worse travail as in its struggle it only hurts itself even more. Spurgeon said, “When the soul grows sorrowful *he* revives it; when it is sinful *he* sanctifies it; when it is weak *he* strengthens it [emphasis mine].”¹⁰ God does not leave you in you’re the thicket of your sin forever if you are his sheep. He comes after you. He turns you around. He sanctifies you. For you are his sheep.

Now, the problem is that this causes some to ask all kinds of other questions. Why do I keep turning away? Will he come after me forever? What if I keep turning to the same danger? Will he get tired of coming after me? These are the questions the **broken hearted** over their sin ask. Others might ask if this means God won’t let them suffer the consequences of their sins. This is often what the **proud** are looking for. But there is no promise here that you won’t get hurt. There is a promise that he will finally rescue you from

¹⁰ C. H. Spurgeon, [*The Treasury of David: Psalms 1-26*](#), vol. 1 (London; Edinburgh; New York: Marshall Brothers, n.d.), 355.

yourself. A Christian should never be looking for some excuse to wander off, but should be comforted in knowing that when they do, the Shepherd comes to turn them around. He brings about repentance.

Why then the translation of “restoring my soul?” It is worth mentioning here that the Latin translates it as “converting” the soul. This is helpful in that it shows that the disposition of the soul changes when the Shepherd comes to the rescue. And this is how you can understand the restoration of the soul. When you sin, your soul is in turmoil. Your heart is in darkness. But when he finally turns you, that repentance he grants releases your soul and sets it free. Anyone struggling with sin, know that being brought to true repentance (not something like Judas or king Saul had which lead them to their deaths) is the greatest of reliefs for your weary soul. Therefore, turn away from the disaster that you are walking into. Turn away and turn back to the Shepherd as he calls you by name and makes you hear his voice of safety.

Then know that he leads you in the paths of righteousness. You have gotten off the path, and now you are being led onto the right path. It is not a path of sin and

rebellion, but of righteousness—obedience, conformity to his will, submission to his rule and authority. This is the narrow path, and all who find it walk towards eternal life.

Why? For **his name's sake**. Yes, he loves the sheep. But, he does this because that is the task assigned to him by his Father. That he should lose none of those given to him by the Father, so that his reputation is pure and undefiled, he does it for his name's sake. The Name of God, as we have seen in previous psalms is the Son of God. And Jesus Christ has been given a name that is above all names. So that every knee will bow at his name, he leads the sheep in paths of righteousness. And for it, we—the sheep—are the beneficiaries of amazing grace.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Some people have taken the valley of the shadow of death as meaning that you have died and been raised to new life. As such, some have said that Psalm 22 is about death, Psalm 23 about resurrection, and

Psalm 24 about the ascension. They read these words as the very words of Jesus himself.

This is possible, but as we have seen, Psalm 22 already had both death and resurrection in it. But Psalm 23 does not seem to end in a resurrected life. *Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.* One raised from the dead (unless he is Lazarus in his first resurrection) does not need such a thing. No, **the shadow of death is the long growing darkness of dangers** and trouble in this life that lead a person to fear it. It can be translated as the valley of “**deepest darkness**” (NRSV). It is anything up to the point of death itself.

Certainly, David faced many of these throughout his life. As do most of the saints in the Bible. I think of the Apostle Paul: **imprisonments, beatings, and often near death. Receiving 39 lashes five time. Being beaten with rods three times. Stoned once. Shipwrecked; adrift at sea; in danger from rivers, from robbers, from his own people, from Gentiles, from false brothers; in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, in cold and exposure (2Co 11:23-28).** This is the valley of the shadow of death. These are things that most of the world’s population living

at this very moment face at least one of at any moment. Often more than one.

If you aren't walking through it right now. You will. The great Delta Blues singer John Hurt sang that great song: "You've got to walk the lonesome valley. You've got it walk it for yourself. Ain't nobody else can walk it for you. You've got to walk that valley for yourself. My momma had to walk that lonesome valley. My father had to walk that lonesome valley. Jesus had to talk that lonesome valley. Nobody else could walk it for him. He had to walk that valley for himself."

Whatever you are going through—an illness, someone else's illness, someone's death, great mental hardship or handicap, suffering of any kind, even of your own doing, know that our Lord **Jesus walked this same valley**, for he was a man susceptible to all our infirmities, yet without sin. Since our Lord Jesus walked it, *I will fear no evil*, for he has come through it alive and well. **Fearing no evil is the center of the poem**. And why not, for this is probably where we sheep need to learn and heed the word the most. Again, I'm not talking about only about death, but about all the things that lead us to it. Death is an evil. But so also are these other

things. Notice in Paul's testimony that he was hungry and thirsty. But this is the very thing we just saw the Lord leads his sheep to have. Yet, when he doesn't give them to you because he is taking you through a dark valley, know it is because he has greener pastures waiting yonder on the other side.

But know also, the reason. *For you are with me.* **The Good Shepherd is not leaving you in the valley** by yourself. He is there with his whole flock and with any little ewe that hears the sound of the wild animals echoing off the canyon walls only to start shaking uncontrollably. He is there in the valley with you. No man can be relied on fully. All will fail. All will run. When the wolves come, the sheep scatter. But the Shepherd does not leave. He stays. He defends. He guides. He leads. He is there the whole time. You can call upon him, for he is near. And he will hear.

Though we need not fear any evil, nevertheless it is hard to get through the valley. Nobody wants to walk the in the valley of the shadow of death. So, to bring us through, the Shepherd has **a rod and a staff**. *Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.* What are these objects used for? Beating the sheep

to a bloody pulp? That's how many people think of "the rod" these days. But no.

The first overseas missionary of the Church of Scotland was a man named **Alexander Duff**. The story is told:

In 1849 Dr. Duff was travelling near Simla under the shadow of the great Himalaya mountains. One day his way led to a narrow bridle-path cut out on the face of a steep ridge; along this narrow path that ran so near the great precipice he saw a shepherd leading on his flock, the shepherd going first, and the flock following him. But now and then the shepherd stopped and looked back. If he saw a sheep creeping up too far on the one hand, or going too near the edge of the dangerous precipice on the other, he would at once turn back and go to it, gently pulling it back. He had a long rod as tall as himself, round the lower half of which was twisted a band of iron.

There was a crook at one end of the rod, and it was with this the shepherd took hold of one of the hind legs of the sheep to pull it back. The thick band of iron at the other end of the rod was really a staff, and was ready for use whenever he saw a hyena or wolf or some other troublesome animal coming near the sheep, for especially

at night these creatures prowled about the flock. With the iron part of the rod he would give a good blow when an attack was threatened.

In Psalm 23:4, we have mention made of "Thy rod and Thy staff." There is meaning in both, and distinct meaning. God's rod draws us back, kindly and lovingly, if we go aside from His path. God's staff protects us against the onset, open or secret, whether it be men or devils which are the enemies watching an opportunity for attack.¹¹

You Prepare a Table before Me

Suddenly we come to a statement that I had not thought through all that well in terms of the rest of the Psalm. *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.* We have to make a decision about whether or not **the shepherd metaphor** continues here or if he is changing images altogether. If the metaphor continues, we would have the shepherd leading the sheep to flat pastureland (i.e. the "table") and the enemies are the wild animals all around. The

¹¹ "The Shepherd's Crook," in *The Christian Week*, Vol. 1 (Sept 1, 1880), 774.

problem is, this has pretty much already been said already. The verse continues. *You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.* Anointing a sheep's head doesn't seem to make much sense, and even less sense is made of a sheep having a cup at this table.

Therefore, it is probable that **he has changed metaphors** now from a Shepherd to **a Host**. Christ becomes the Great Host of a marvelous banquet. Sound familiar? **The Wedding Feast of the Lamb**. To “**prepare a table**” means to “**prepare a meal**.” One thinks of Abraham when the Angel of the LORD and two other angels showed up unexpectedly at his house one day. As soon as he could, he ran into his tent and told Sarah, “**Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes. And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man who prepared it quickly**” (**Gen 18:6-7**).

The task of preparing the meals was not Abraham's, but that of his wife and his servants. This was the custom throughout biblical times. This is another reason why seeing Christ in this psalm is important. God the Father isn't preparing the meal. Rather, he leaves that up to his Servant—the Lord Jesus. In Proverbs, Wisdom is

personified as co-creator with God, a master workman eternally by his side. Christ is the Wisdom of God. But Wisdom is also personified as a woman. And Proverbs says, “Wisdom has built her house, ... she has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine, She has also *prepared her table* ... she says, ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed’” (Prov 9:1-5). The Lord Jesus has spread a table now “before me.” That is, before his people. And what delights are to be found at his table: forgiveness of sins, removal of fear, wanting for nothing, eternal life, feasting upon the Bread of Life, drinking from the Water of Life.

He does this in the presence of my enemies. Think about all of the people who got angry at Jesus because of who he chose to eat with. He ate with Zacchaeus. “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner” (Luke 19:7). He did this kind of thing regularly. He ate in the presence of his enemies. Our enemies are those who mock the Lord of the Table. But God prepares for us a table anyway.

One time, Jesus went to eat in the house of a Pharisee (Luke 7:36). Suddenly, a woman of the—a sinner—came into the house with an alabaster flask of ointment, and she began to anoint his feet with it. It was customary to anoint

the dinner guests with oil, but this story usurps the traditional way of doing it. In the Psalm, the Lord is anointing my head! He is acting as the servant to me. What a remarkable grace this is, so precious are his saints in his sight.

His cup overflows. At this meal, which is quite public, David is having his every want attended. His cup keeps getting filled up. Such are the delights of sitting in the presence of the living Christ. Why should we ever want? *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*

Dwelling in the LORD's House

And where does this meal take place? *And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.* What is the Lord's house? It is the place where the Lord resides. In the OT it is heaven and it is the temple. In the NT, it is his church. In eternity, it is the new heavens and earth.

The Apostle has an interesting discussion of drinking the cup of the Lord and partaking of the table of the Lord in **1 Corinthians 10:16-21**. He contrasts the Lord's Supper here with the cup and table of demons. What is this table he has

prepared as such great cost? And what is this cup he offers? His own body and blood broken and bleeding on the cross.

And where does he offer it? In his house, with his people, the Great Feast is here. And if you are in Christ, you are welcome to his table. For how long? The last word can be translated as “forever” or as “all the days of my life.” The latter leads to the former. His table is always spread for you who desire to eat and drink freely of Christ and all his benefits. And when you do, you shall never want.

Allow me to conclude with a quote from a footnote in Philip Schaff’s History of the Christian Church by a man named Stanley. “What was the popular Religion of the first Christians? It was, in a word, the Religion of the Good Shepherd. The kindness, the courage, the grace, the love, the beauty of the Good Shepherd was to them, if we may so say, Prayer Book and Articles, Creeds and Canons, all in one. They looked on that figure, and it conveyed to them all that they wanted. As ages passed on, the Good Shepherd faded away from the mind of the Christian world, and other emblems of the Christian faith have taken his place. Instead of gracious and gentle Pastor, there came the Omnipotent Judge or the Crucified Sufferer, or the Infant in his Mother’s

arms, or the Master in His Parting Supper, or the figures of innumerable saints and angels, or the elaborate expositions of the various forms of theological controversy.”¹²

Recovering the Good Shepherd image is vital if we want to understand both ourselves as sheep in all of our weakness and stupidity—vital for anyone needing to be humbled to repentance, and our Savior as the Shepherd so strong to save, so ready to aid, so kind and tender to carry us out of our disasters and to lead us home to a loving Heavenly Father who has ordained that he should do all of these things that we might dwell in his house forever.

¹² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume II: Ante-Nicene Christianity* (CCEL, 1894), Chapter 7, n. 561.