

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is the most beloved song of all time, and perhaps, the greatest piece of literature ever written. David's poem consists of seven simple statements.

It's written the way all Middle Eastern stories are written, in chiasmatic style. "Chi" is the Greek letter "X." "Chiasmatic," means it's written like the left side of the X.

David begins by telling us he has everything he needs (because he has the Lord). He concludes by telling us, because of this, he will have everything he needs, *forever*.

In the second and sixth statements, he has all the food and drink he needs. In the third and fifth statements, he has all the peace and security he needs. In the exact middle of the poem, he says, "So even in my darkest moments, I will not fear."

If the Lord is *your* shepherd – you will have no wants, including food and drink and security and peace, so you will never have to fear, but face the world with faith and hope, and the world-to-come with anticipation.

Context – David was a shepherd in His childhood. He understood sheep and shepherding.

Community - David writes as a Middle Easterner. Westerners think like individuals: "me, my, and I." Easterners think like a community. They think, "We, ours, and us." When they see the eleven, "I," "me" and "my's" in this poem, they see themselves not alone, but in the middle of a flock, in the middle of a community. Yes, these promises here are for "me," but they are promises for all of us. All of us get to experience this life with the shepherd.

Sheep - David writes this psalm from the perspective of a sheep. Sheep are dumb and defenseless and dependent. If the Lord is your shepherd, then you are a sheep.

Verse 1 summarizes the whole song: *The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not be in want.*

He takes care of all my wants. This is the world of the sheep.

Verse 2 - Sheep only lie down when they have had plenty to eat, have quenched their thirst, and are not threatened by wild animals or disturbed by biting bugs. David is saying, "God *settles* me down in green pastures." The Lord settles His sheep in green pastures, by leading them to places of refreshment they could not find on their own.

The good shepherd "leads" David. He doesn't "drive" me. The shepherd does this by walking slowly ahead of his sheep and either playing his own 10-second tune on a pipe or singing his own unique song or "call." Each sheep knows his shepherd's tune, or his pipe. They know his "voice."

The phrase, *He leads me beside still waters* is literally, "beside *stilled* waters." Sheep are afraid to drink from moving water, even if it's shallow. They know instinctively, if they get caught in that water, their wool will soak it up and drown them. So, where there's a stream, the shepherd will dig a short, dead-end channel that leads away from the stream. All the sheep will line up and drink along that channel.

Verse 3 – *He restores my soul* means "He brings me back." The sheep is lost, and the good shepherd is obliged to go after it, find it, and carry it back. Once a sheep knows that it is lost, it tries to hide under a bush or rock and begins quivering and bleating. The shepherd must locate it quickly lest it be heard and killed by a wild animal. On being found, it's usually too traumatized to walk and must be carried back to the flock or village. Therefore, the shepherd must "lead" the sheep back to "paths of righteousness." To "right paths."

A lost sheep can't find its way home. The only hope for a lost sheep is the shepherd. Once I've strayed off the path, He must pick me up and carry me to safety. I can't do it on my own. I need the shepherd!

All the villagers know, the good shepherds are the ones who never lose a sheep and who always bring back their lost ones. This is the honorable thing to do.

Verse 4 - In certain places in the Holy Land, where there is sandstone that has been carved by wind and rain for centuries, there are deep, dark valleys of danger that are no joke to sheep or people. The walls are so close together, they keep out the sun. And when there's a flood, there is no place to run, these narrow canyons

become a valley of death. Bandits can also hide here. The fear of death is a constant companion while passing through them.

Sheep have a special problem: they have no defenses. The sheep's only security is the shepherd.

--Rod - a 2 ½ foot club, usually carved out of a piece of wood with a knot in the end. The shepherd would imbed pieces of iron in it to add strength and weight to the knot. The shepherd would hurl this at predators, aiming for the head.

--Staff or crook - a long stick with a curve on the end of it. The shepherd climbs with it, and can use it to direct the sheep, who huddle around him. It's long enough to reach and guide the closest sheep in the right direction. It's usually five feet long, and the shepherd is never without it.

When a lamb can't scramble down from a ledge or falls into a crevice, the shepherd uses his staff to catch him by the leg or shoulder and gently lift it back onto the path.

The rod is for protecting the flock from external threats. The staff is for directing the flock in its daily grazing. The sight of these two tools *comforts* the sheep.

Verse 5 - David makes a shift from being a sheep, to a guest. And in his mind, God moves from being a shepherd, to a host.

--**Table** - To "prepare a table" means "to prepare a meal." In traditional Middle Eastern society, people eat without plates or utensils. Everyone takes a piece of flatbread and tears off a small piece, which they use to lift food from the common dish to the mouth. Each bite starts with a fresh piece of bread. There is nothing to do to "set the table."

This host, my host, prepares my meal in the presence of my enemies. People who are hostile to me. The host knows that if He's preparing a meal for me, the people who are watching and are hostile toward me will become hostile towards him too. But he doesn't care. He loves me enough to bear the scorn of people who don't like me.

-**Anointing** - Excellent hosts, in the Middle East, do more than serve you food. They make your stay at their home pleasant. They wash your feet and anoint your head with oil. David's enemies who are present are infuriated! His host is sparing no effort to make this one whom they hate feel special.

-**Overflowing cup** - If that's not bad enough, waiters are "hovering" around him, so that every time he takes a sip of wine, they refill his cup. It's overflowing! He can never drink it down!

Maybe your life is this way too?

Verse 6 – As David thinks about how God has always cared for him, he thinks about the future.

It's getting towards nighttime. The shepherd is leading you home. As it gets dark, he stations his assistant at the rear of the herd, so no wolf can attack. If the shepherd has a dog, he sends him to the rear too.

As the shepherd leads you from the front, his dog and assistant watch over you from the back. They're your "rear guard." David says, "the two guards God has stationed to follow me home are 'goodness' and 'mercy.'"

Goodness and mercy guide my flanks. They follow me all the days of my life. I am never without them.

If the Lord is your shepherd, you are not being followed by evil. You are being followed by goodness, and mercy. All the days of your life. And if that's not enough, because the shepherd is also a host, he has prepared a place for you. It's called heaven. You will live in His house there, forever!

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

Nine words. You know the most important word in those nine? It's the little word, "my."

Lots of people know that the Lord is *a* shepherd. And lots know that He is *the* shepherd. But only some know Him as *their* shepherd. Who is your shepherd?