

July 12/13, 2003

For Me?!

Psalm 23

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Good morning. Is anybody here tired? You know, at the end of a week sometimes we're just kind of worn out. And I know one of the things that tires me out is feeling like I'm constantly being bombarded with messages and being marketed to. Those messages are constantly trying to convince me that I need things or that there are things missing in my life. They tell me if I had this or I had that I'd be happier or better; if I had the right pills I'd have all my ills cured; if I drove the right car I'd have status and all that I need. And I feel like I'm just being bombarded and attacked by all of this stuff people are trying to convince me to buy.

This week my wife and I went to the north shore of Lake Superior up in Minnesota. It's a beautiful, quiet place. I see some heads nodding—you've been there. You need to go, especially if you can pick the hottest week here and go up there. It's about 70 degrees and the water—it's just awesome. We're driving through these beautiful north woods of Minnesota and there's a giant billboard every hundred yards. The trees are about a hundred feet tall, so they put the signs on poles 200 feet tall. They just don't want you to miss that there's a casino at the next exit. And you feel like the whole experience is destroyed a little bit because you're being asked to always buy something else.

Have you ever bought something and then had buyer's remorse? You know, where you give in once in a while and you actually believe the message to buy the stuff. I remember a few years ago that a friend and I were working at a travel show out in Colorado. One of the other booths there was this small company that made these really awesome tents (at least the tent in the showroom was awesome). And I thought, *Man, I've got to have that tent. It's big; our whole family could be in this.* So I bought this tent.

Of course they shipped it to me several weeks later, and the tent I got was nothing like that one in the showroom. And by the time I got it, the company was kind of out of business. I don't know where they came from and I don't know where they went. But that tent has been sitting on my garage floor in Aurora for the last three or four years. It has never been put up. It's just a piece of junk! My wife reminds me every time we go out that it was a piece of junk and a bad purchase. And I have to agree; I have some buyer's remorse about that.

You know, that's true for a lot of things. A lot of things we're convinced that we need, but when we actually get them they don't live up to their billing. But when you choose to walk with God, to become a part of His family, there really is no buyer's remorse.

In our psalm today, David is giving us a bold personal testimonial of someone who has participated in the family of God and has said, "Here's my testimonial: here's my statement of satisfaction." And he wrote it for us so that we could read it and say, "Yeah, that's why I believe; that's why I'm a follower of Jesus"...or for those who haven't yet made that decision to say, "Yes, I want to follow."

I'd like you to turn in your Bibles to Psalm 23, which is our psalm for today. Now, in some ways it's kind of difficult to speak on Psalm 23. This is the most familiar psalm, probably the most familiar passage of Scripture in all of the Bible. We could just close our Bibles and I'm guessing 95 percent of us could quote it as we go through it. So it's a little challenging to make

that fresh. But it's a powerful psalm and I think there's more to it than sometimes we think. It is a very bold, boastful statement of David about his God and what God has done for him.

One of the challenges of this psalm is understanding this imagery of a sheep and shepherd. Very, very few of us know anything about sheep or have ever even been around sheep. Any of you raised sheep or been on a farm where there were sheep? I see just about three or four people out of 800. I happened to grow up with sheep and cattle and pigs, so I had that experience. But as we walk through this psalm, part of what I want to do is to help you understand some of what went into raising sheep—because David is comparing God's activity in our lives to what a shepherd does for the sheep.

So let's get started in the psalm. It really begins in verse 1 with his bold statement of satisfaction:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. (NASB)

Now I want to kind of unpack that, because I think there are two important truths in that very first phrase that we need to come to grips with, because the whole rest of the psalm is going to flow out of it. The first one is quite obvious, but sometimes we want to deny it—and that is that David saw himself as a sheep. And *we* are sheep. Now, not many people that I know want to acknowledge that they're a sheep.

We actually do a little exercise in our Discovery Class to try to get to know each other a little bit. One of the questions that we ask is, "If you had to pick an animal that describes your personality, what would it be?" And I have never heard anybody say, "I'm a sheep."

Sheep are kind of messy; sheep are weak; sheep are vulnerable. They're not the picture of independence or security. They're very insecure animals; they're prone to wander and stray and get into trouble. They're prone to disease and attack—they're quite helpless when being attacked. And frankly, they're loud and they're messy and they're dirty.

Yet David was recognizing, as a shepherd who had been out in the field with sheep, *You know, I'm a lot like them*. And the acknowledgement here that "the LORD is my shepherd" required David to understand that he was a sheep that needed a shepherd. He needed someone greater than himself to enter his life and to help give him direction, guidance, and protection—all of the things he realized he needed in his life. He needed outside help. He didn't have that within himself, just like sheep don't have it within themselves to take care of themselves.

The image of God's people being sheep is really all throughout the Scriptures. Remember, Jesus looked at the people He had been teaching, and it says He was moved with compassion, for they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Sheep need to have a shepherd. They need to have guidance; they need protection. They need someone else to enter into their lives in order for them to survive and to thrive. So we have to come to grips with the fact that we are sheep and we need help.

Now the second part, which is really the very first phrase of the verse, is "the LORD is my shepherd." That's a very stunning thing as well. In fact, up to this point in the Psalms, God has been presented as a rock, a fortress, a deliverer, a king, a stronghold—these great and powerful images, these kingly images, these majestic images of God. And David is saying, "Yes, it's true that God is all of those things...but God is also a shepherd."

No one really ever wanted to be a shepherd. A shepherd's life was hard. Shepherding sheep is very hard work. You have to live with them basically 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You can't ever leave them alone because they need constant care and protection. In fact, you realize as you read through some of the stories of the Old Testament that typically the youngest son was the one who was sent out to take care of the sheep. Nobody wanted the job! It was hard, dirty work.

David is making this very profound statement about God's commitment to His people: that He is a shepherd to them. He is always on guard. He is always involved in the lives of His sheep. He is the good shepherd, the great shepherd, the *perfect* shepherd. And He is not, David is saying, the shepherd of everyone. David is saying, "No, this is more intimate than that. He is *my* shepherd." God is not just the God of all His people—which He is—but God is intimately acquainted and involved in each one of His sheep's, each person's, life. And David is making this very bold statement: "The Lord Jehovah, the great God, is also a shepherd...and He's my shepherd."

The second phrase of verse 1 flows right out of that: "I shall not want." It really could be more accurately translated in English: "I do not lack for anything I need." Because the Lord is my shepherd, I do not lack for anything I need. The shepherd provides it all. You will notice as we go through this psalm that every single action in this psalm is what the shepherd is doing. So if you wanted to come to a message and you were expecting to hear five things you need to do as a result of this message, you're going to be disappointed. If you came thinking, *Oh no, they're going to lay another one on me; I'm going to have to do something else*, then this *is* the message for you, because everything in this psalm is the shepherd's doing.

This is a psalm of encouragement. This is a psalm of hope. This is a psalm of saying, "Yes, God, I'm glad You're my shepherd because here are all the benefits I have because You're my shepherd." David says, "I don't lack anything. Everything I need You provide. You're the great shepherd."

He begins to list those benefits in verse 2. What is the benefit that David has experienced of having God as his shepherd? Verse 2:

He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. (NASB)

The first snapshot, or picture if you will, is of these very contented, happy sheep resting peacefully in a green pasture beside quiet water. Actually, a good translation of "He leads me beside quiet waters" would be "He leads me beside the waters of rest." It's a very tranquil picture. It's a picture of contented sheep—being totally satisfied. They're not hungry because there's abundant food. They're not thirsty because there's abundant water. And the shepherd has led them to that perfect place: that place of rest and contentment. He has provided for them everything that they need in order to be contented, to be happy.

Phillip Keller was a shepherd and he wrote a book on Psalm 23 from a shepherd's perspective. In that book he talks about how difficult it is to get sheep to settle down, to quiet down, to be contented. Sheep are very restless. In order for them to rest, they have to, number one, have adequate food and water so that they're satisfied.

They also need to be free from fear. They're very jittery animals, so they're always frightened and fearful and kind of "up and about." So the shepherd has to make sure there's a feeling of security in order for the sheep to lie down and rest.

They also won't lie down if there are pesky things that are bothering them—like flies and fleas. So the shepherd has to make sure that those pests are removed as best as possible so the sheep will lie down.

And sheep won't rest if they are fighting with each other—and they're always kind of butting at each other and banging each other around. Until they've rested and those conflicts have been settled and the sheep have been separated, they just don't settle down.

David is really saying that the picture of contented sheep is a great picture of those who have entered into God's flock. Those who have become a part of His flock are people who are content. They've been satisfied because God has provided the salvation that they've needed. It's really a picture of salvation. It's a picture of grace: that God has given us exactly what we need. We can be contented. We can stop our striving and our running and our frantic pace and activity—trying to gain favor, trying to get something that will satisfy—because God has provided. He has led us to green pasture. He has taken us to the quiet water.

It's interesting, because Jesus said that He was the bread of life: He was the food that satisfied. And He also said that He was the living water: He was the water that quenched the thirst of every person. In a sense, what David has experienced is that God Himself is the green pasture and the quiet water. When you've entered into a relationship with Him, you can stop your striving and you can stop your competing. You can stop trying to earn God's favor and approval. You can just rest and enjoy, because He has provided it for you. That's the shepherd's role: *He* makes me lie down in green pasture. *He* leads me to the quiet water of rest.

Notice in verse 3 as he continues:

He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. (NASB)

Sheep, as I mentioned before, are often weak and prone to disease and prone to getting stuck in different places. They need to be restored; they need to be rescued. In fact, Phillip Keller accounts that one particular thing that happens to sheep frequently is that they will lie down in a low spot, maybe a soft place in the grass, and roll over on their side to stretch out. And if they're well fed and kind of fat and have a full fleece, many times they'll get over on their side and they can't get back up. So they'll kick and kick and try to get up. And the more they kick, the more they go on their back, until their legs are sticking straight up in the air and they're kicking wildly at the air. It's kind of a funny picture. They call that "being cast."

When a sheep was cast or cast down, they were stuck; they couldn't get up on their own. And if you left them there very long, they'd bang their head against the ground enough that they would have brain damage and ultimately die. The shepherd had to get there and lift them, put them back on their feet and hold them in place until they got their bearings, until the dizziness was gone from their head. The shepherd would restore them and hold them until they were ready to run off and join the flock again.

It is a beautiful picture of the fact that when we become a part of God's flock, He constantly is at work restoring us. When we're stuck, when we've fallen down, when we've tripped up and fallen into a hole, God is the one who comes along and lifts us up, sets us back on our feet and restores life to us. It really is a picture of the growth process. We come into this place of rest and satisfaction through salvation. And then God begins the work of restoration.

It's ongoing in our whole life, isn't it? It's a constant restoration. God is committed to restoring life back to the way He intended it to be, and so He's always restoring us in different ways. We have all kinds of issues that we need to overcome. Some are stuck in anger; some are stuck in unforgiveness; some are stuck in impurity. There are all kinds of issues and places where we're stuck. And here's the picture of the shepherd—not saying, “Shame on you, sheep. Good luck getting out of that mess!”—but gently coming over and lifting us up, putting us back on our feet, restoring us to health.

Not only does He restore the sheep, but it says the shepherd leads them in the paths of righteousness. Sheep can't be left on their own. You know, you can put cattle out in a pasture and when the grass is eaten down in one place, they'll move to where the grass is better. Sheep would just stay there and eat it until there was dirt. In fact they've been known to actually pull the roots up out of the ground and leave nothing—just decimated a pasture. They have to be guided down the path and led to the new pasture. They have to be taken to the water. They don't get there on their own.

Here David is saying that God does that for us. He leads us in the right path. He leads us down the path towards righteousness. He leads us in the path that will ultimately take us to our destination. He knows the path that we ought to take and He's leading us. He's going out in front of us and He's showing us the way. It's a great picture of God and how He uses the Word to point out the way we ought to go. God speaks to our hearts, and He shows us the things we ought to do, the ways we ought to think, and the paths we ought to walk down. We just simply have to follow. God leads us down the paths of righteousness.

And notice He does that for His name's sake. In areas where there was ranching and sheep herding, a shepherd's reputation was built on the quality of his flock. If you had a well fed, high producing flock, everybody around admired you and respected you. They would think, *This is a good shepherd*. If your pastures were green and lush and not overeaten or distended, if the waters were clean and pure and you had made sure there was plenty of it for your sheep, people would admire and respect that. They would say, “That's a great shepherd.”

David is saying that God has staked His reputation on His care for His flock: that what God does for us is not because we've earned it or deserved it, but because He has attached His name to us. We are *His* sheep. And *He* wants to demonstrate—not only to us but to everybody else who would watch: angels, principalities, powers, the outside world—that He's a great shepherd. So we see that in the way He cares for His sheep. He has staked His own reputation on it. “For His name's sake” He leads, He restores, He guides.

Now notice in verse 4 the pronoun “He” changes. As David begins to go down into another aspect of life, it becomes very personal. He begins to address God as “You.” He's not just talking *about* God; now he's talking *to* God and he's expressing to God his appreciation for what God does. Notice what it says:

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil,
for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.** (NASB)

Shepherds in Israel, and even in the United States and other places, have to move the sheep. In those areas you would be in the lowlands, the meadowlands in the wintertime, in the springtime where the grass was green. But as the summer progressed and that grass was worn out, the shepherd would have to take the sheep up into the mountains—up into the high country

where it was cooler, where the grass was still growing and where it wasn't parched and dry and worn down. And many times that would require them to travel through these narrow, dark canyons up into the high country.

You've driven through those kinds of places. It's dark and shadowy. The sun oftentimes doesn't shine down and there's this transition of atmosphere that happens. So you can have these sudden storms where it hails and sleet and rains, and lightning and flashfloods sometimes come down those narrow valleys. It was that experience of traveling through these dark canyons where wild animals would be hiding in the crevices of the rocks, and these sheep would have to walk through there. It was a frightening time and a very unsettling time for the sheep. David is saying it's only the presence of the shepherd with the sheep in those dark moments that calms their fears and allows them to go on through to the higher ground.

David is saying he acknowledges this. It's a very honest look at life. There are hard, dark places that we have to pass through. There are very dark shadowy places. There are very fearful things that we have to go through in life, but they're on the way to the higher ground that God wants to take us to. There's no other way to get there. It could be sickness, disease, the loss of a job or career, a broken relationship, children who are not following after God or not in contact with you. There are many different dark places that we end up traveling.

It's scary sometimes and you wonder, *Am I alone? Is there anybody there? What do I do? I don't know what to do. I'm never been in this kind of a place before.* What David is saying is that God's comforting presence is there in the dark places. You are not alone in the dark places. God is there with you.

Now, I told you earlier that my wife and I went to the north shore of Minnesota, to Lake Superior, this week. It was quiet; it was restful. It was really the picture of Psalm 23, verses 2 and 3. I felt like I was living this psalm. And then I got home and I lived verse 4. When I got home there were all kinds of messes, and I'm thinking for just a moment, *What in the world? How did this happen? I was at the quiet water.*

And then I realized I'm living Psalm 23. Maybe God ordained it for this week since I'm talking about it today. But there were scary things and dark things, and things that I didn't understand. And the only thing that allowed me to go through that (and my things were minor compared to what I know others go through) was that I knew God was there. He wasn't distant at that point of need. He was right there beside me.

He says it's the dark "valley of the shadow of death" because ultimately the scariest thing that we face as humans is death: that separation; that unknown, uncharted territory—because you only go that way once. It's the unknown, the uncertainty, and the fact that nobody can go with you that makes it so frightening. David faced death many, many times, and I'm sure there were many times in his life when he didn't know whether he would live to see another day. Yet, David said every time he faced those dark moments he recognized that the presence of God was with him, that he wasn't walking it alone.

I know that you've probably heard testimony after testimony of people who have been at the bedsides of people who've died, people who've been in the flock, people who've walked with God. Again and again, what you hear is that those people who were dying expressed this confidence that God was there with them, that they had a sense of His presence as they passed through that dark valley to the higher ground.

There is an intimacy with God that you can't know in any other place but in the place of suffering, in the place of difficulty. Paul went so far as to say, "I want to know the power of God's resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings." If you really want to know God, you're going to know Him in the deepest way in the difficult, hard, dark times—because He's going to show up in a personal way that you'll just not experience in any other way. But He's there and you're never alone. Never alone!

He says too that God's rod and staff comfort him. The rod was a weapon that the shepherd carried. It was a club, and it was heavy. It was probably not that long, and he would either use it to hit a cougar or a lion or whatever it was that was on the way, or perhaps to throw it at them and scare them off or hope to hit them in the head and knock them silly. But it was something the shepherd would use against the enemies.

Here is the picture of God as our protector. He not only gives us His comforting presence in the dark times, but He's the one who protects us against the enemy. Now I'm sure if you're like me, there are times when you feel attacked. You feel attacked sometimes and you feel like there are enemies crouching out there. You know, sometimes we feel that Satan really wants to get at us—to get at our mind and the way we're thinking—to discourage us. In fact, the Scripture tells us that Satan is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. He's that crouching animal in the dark valley. And at those moments when we're fearful he can attack and he can say, "God isn't good."

But God is our protector. God is our defender. God will defeat the enemy. God will stand for us and we can have confidence that He's there. That gives comforting reassurance. The rod is in God's hands. His justice will be done. The enemies will be scattered. He says, "Not only does the rod—God's protection—comfort him but also His staff."

The staff is the thing we typically think of a shepherd carrying. It's that long cane with a hook at the end that a shepherd would use to pull sheep out of the thicket, the thorns. Or maybe when a sheep was stuck down on a ledge, he could reach down and pull it up. It also was used to guide the sheep: he could tap them on the side to correct their paths and steer them to places where they should go and away from things where they shouldn't go.

It's really a sign of God's correction in our life. In the dark times God's presence is there, but also God is there to correct us. He's there to guide us into the right way of thinking. He's there to rescue us and pull us out of those dark crevices and those places of danger. David says, "That gives me reassurance—to know that God has weapons in His hands, that He will handle whatever I face, that I'm not left on my own to handle it, to fight the battles. But God will fight with me. God will fight for me. I just need to trust Him."

There's a change in verse 5. There is some disagreement among scholars about whether the imagery of sheep and shepherd continues or whether there's a change here to a whole different picture. I tend to think it's a whole different picture, because the picture in verse 5 is of feasting at a banquet, and I have a hard time picturing sheep sitting at a table drinking out of a cup. I don't know, maybe on a cartoon, but I just can't see it in real life. It seems that what David has done is kind of process through God as a shepherd all the way through life's journey. It is through the quiet places of rest, and He has led me and restored me and brought me through the darkness, and now I'm entering into paradise.

Verse 5 is this description of the end of the road, the end of life. And now I'm no longer a sheep but I'm a son in God's household, there to enjoy everything that He has prepared. Notice what the shepherd has done:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. (NASB)

It's this picture of celebration and of victory. Having walked through the valleys and having been guided and directed by the shepherd, we now come to this feast and this banquet, this lavish place of paradise to enjoy the very presence of God.

It really is a picture, the same one we have in Revelation, of coming to this marriage supper of the Lamb and feasting with Jesus. It's a picture of enjoying His presence and having everything we need and everything that we ever hoped or dreamed for. Oil is a picture of refreshment, of blessing, of joy. Whenever you see the picture of oil in the Scriptures, it's always connotating joy—many times associated with the Holy Spirit. So he is saying it's a place of joy; it's a place of lavish provision.

“My cup overflows.” The blessing of God overflows in my life. I can't even contain it all; He's provided so much. We talk about whether people see the glass as half full or half empty. David says, “No, the glass isn't half full or half empty; it's overflowing!” God's provision is abundant. It's more than we could ever even take in.

Paul described heaven when he said, “Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor entered into the heart of man all that God has prepared for those who love Him.” You can hardly imagine what it will be like. And David is saying at the end of this journey, being guided by the Shepherd, “He has not only led me through life but He has prepared an eternity for me. He's prepared paradise for me. And it's a perfect place. It's a lavish place. It's a place of incredible fulfillment and satisfaction forever.”

It really is a picture of life's journey and that great end that we're all waiting for. In verse 6 he summarizes all of these benefits by a simple statement:

Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life. (NASB)

He's reflecting back on God's character. He is saying God is good, and God's goodness is His desire to pour out the best for us. He desires to give us what's best. David is saying, “Through all the days of my life, God is pouring out His goodness into my life.” But also he says His mercy, or His lovingkindness, His steadfast love, His unchanging commitment to me follows me all the days of my life. God never changes His mind about me. He never distances Himself from me. He never pushes me away. He never removes me from the flock. His steadfast love follows me all the days of my life.

Again, you'll notice he says it follows. God's goodness and His lovingkindness *follow* David all the days of his life. It doesn't say God is good and kind and loving...and if you want it, come and get it. He's saying, “God is literally pursuing me all through my life.” Now, we talk about pursuing God. We have it on the banner here on the wall—that we need to be pursuing God; we need to be actively seeking to enter into relationship with God.

But the great truth is that God is pursuing us. He pursued you while you were lost. Before you ever even knew Him, He pursued you. And He continues to pursue you and me today with His goodness and His lovingkindness. He wants the best.

David, having walked through a life of many different experiences, is thinking, *I have no buyer's remorse for being a sheep in this flock. I would do it again and I would encourage anybody else to do it.* David is saying, "This is my shepherd. Look at Him. Look at what He does. Look at how He cares for the sheep. Look at how He has cared for me. I lack nothing that I need."

God's goodness and mercy pursue me all the days of my life, and then ultimately:

I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (v. 6b, NASB)

Now there are a lot of things in this world that offer us incredible promises. There are many products that you can purchase that offer you health, happiness, security, satisfaction. Even relationships with other people tempt us with complete and total satisfaction. But the bottom line is there is no one who satisfies but God Himself. David says, "I have walked the path of life and I wouldn't trade my Shepherd for anyone else."

I don't know where you're at right now. I'm sure many of you are a part of the flock. But you may be discouraged today. You may be feeling like you're in that dark valley and wondering, *Where is God in all of it?* You need to let this psalm and the Holy Spirit speak to your heart and reassure you that He's there, that He's committed to you, that He's a personal shepherd, that He will walk with you every step of the way. Whether in the high mountaintops or the low valleys, He will be there.

And if you're still on the outside of the pen, not sure if you really want to be a part of this flock, God's flock, this psalm blares out to you, saying, "You can trust this shepherd; you can come to Him. Come and join the flock. Come be a part of *this* family. Come experience this shepherd. You won't be disappointed."

These are not idle words spoken by someone paid to market a product. These are the words of an experienced man who has walked with God for many years. And he says, "I don't regret a single moment of it. It's been everything I ever wanted and much, much more."

Our Father, we thank You so much that this is the kind of God You are. You are the good shepherd. You are my good shepherd. You will lead us, guide us, protect us and bring us to paradise. For these things we are forever grateful, Amen.