

Psalm 23 – Study Guide¹

Psalm 23 appears to be one of the most well-known and often quoted texts of Scripture by both those who love the Scriptures and those who have never given them any respectable attention. It is among the selective class of Scriptures whose membership consists of the Ten Commandments and The Lord's Prayer – disproportionately cited and referenced with little to no functional understanding by most.

So it is a reasonable question as to how this particular Psalm has taken such a preeminent role in terms of popular culture - sacred and secular. It has, in terms of popular reference and citation, taken the place of preeminence over other well-known psalms, such as Psalm 1, 2, 15, 19, 22, 51, 119, 139, 150, etc.

I am persuaded that there are two reasons for this:

1) The universal desire to be comforted in the reality of death, which all men know will visit them at some time. This is likely the broader appeal, particularly among the secular community. Placing their greatest emphasis on 23:4, people universally find comfort with being shepherded through the darkest dark or death. The problem is that for most such persons this is a stolen comfort which will ultimately provide them no real satisfaction as they do not know the Good Shepherd and he does not know them, they neither know his voice or follow, and they are taking in a comfort that is not theirs to enjoy. This is both most unfortunate and opportunistic. Unfortunate because people are perishing with a hope that is rooted in a relationship they do not have, but opportunistic because we can direct them to the joys of this hope. Now, I may be saying “we” with more charity than I should. Perhaps this is an opportunity for you to examine your own comfort in the face of the inevitable reality of death. Is it rooted in faith and repentance? Do you truthfully know the Good Shepherd and long for his presence, not only in a euphoric later, but now and with every breath the Lord affords you? David, who penned this magnificent Psalm, certainly did.

2) The comforting grace of The LORD being a shepherd and caring for his own, this having more influence over those who know and love the Lord, and in its own right is a wonderful reason to esteem this Psalm. As I will try to make plain throughout this guide, I am persuaded that 23:1 is the thesis or core message of this Psalm. There is a natural, pure, and satisfying attraction to embracing the truth that The LORD is my shepherd and I shall not want, lack, or need as I am wholly satisfied in him and will forever enjoy his care, abundance, and presence all the days of my life... and beyond.

“The psalm expresses confidence in God’s goodness – in this life and in the life to come. The personal way in which the psalmist speaks of God, the imagery of God’s soothing guidance, and the ensuing confidence in God have all been factors in making this one of the most charming and beloved of the psalms. The universal appeal of this psalm lies in the comfort it gives to those who have confronted the most difficult periods of life. It is a psalm of God’s strength and grace for all ages.”²

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ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

² The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition: Psalms, Volume 5. Willem A. VanGemeren. Zondervan, 2008 (Hereafter: VanGemeren), Pg.252

Structure

From my work in the text I have concluded that 23:1 is the Thesis/Core of the Psalm and its truth is developed throughout the following five verses. In 23:2-4 the Shepherding metaphor is most poignant and then 23:5-6 the truths articulated in the preceding verses are poetically fleshed out in a more natural context.

23:1 Thesis/Core of the Psalm: The LORD is my shepherd, therefore I shall not want/lack/need, but will have provision and care in abundance and its chief application is his presence.

23:2 Natural illustration of shepherding care – providing good provision.

Green pastures.

Still waters.

23:3-4 Supernatural/Spiritual correlation of the shepherding care – providing good provision, care, and comfort. It also provides a critical insight into the shepherding care (for the Shepherd's name's sake).

Restoring of soul.

Paths of righteousness.

Comforting amidst great darkness.

23:5 Super abundances in comfort and care.

23:6 The chief application of the Good Shepherd being his Shepherd – not wanting as goodness and mercy/love will pursue him for life and the unparalleled privilege of being in The LORD's presence is realized and enjoyed.

James Boice wholeheartedly concurs with my conclusion that 23:1 captures the very essence of the entirety of the psalm. "The psalm is a masterpiece throughout. But if ever a psalm could stand almost on a single line, it is this one, and the line it can stand on is the first. In fact, it can stand on only part of a line, the part which says, 'The LORD is my shepherd.'"³

Boice does not provide an overt structuring of the Psalm, but he does argue for its shepherding continuity. Part of this is his addressing some insightful shepherding elements such as an anointing of sorts for the sheep (an oil with various ingredients that was both medicinal in care and a repellant of insects) and referencing "tablelands" where summer grazing would occur after its thorough preparation by the shepherd. However, he does not directly address the presence of enemies beyond ridding the area of varmints and he does not give direct treatment to how one's cup overflowing would fit into this more overt shepherding image so his continuity is welcomed, but feels a little forced.⁴

John MacArthur states that David "...progressively unveils his personal relationship with the Lord in 3 stages."⁵

I. David's Exclamation: The Lord Is My Shepherd" (23:1a)

II. David's Expectations (23:1b-5b)

A. "I Shall Not Want" (23:1b-3)

B. "I Will Fear No Evil" (23:4,5b)

III. David's Exultation: "My Cup Runs Over" (23:5c-6)

³ An Expository Commentary: Psalms, Volume 1. James Montgomery Boice. Baker Books, 1994 (Hereafter: Boice), Pg.207

⁴ Boice, Pgs.211-212

⁵ The MacArthur Study Bible, NKJV. Word Bibles, 1997. (Hereafter: MacArthur), Pg.762 (citation is intended to include both the quote and structure)

The English Standard Version Study Bible sees two primary divisions in the Psalm:⁶

23:1-4 The Lord as Shepherd who cares for the sheep.

23:5-6 The Lord as Host who cares for his guest.

Note that the ESV SB recognizes that some persons, myself included, do not see as firm a break in the psalm as they do. So they provide the following explanation: “Some have argued that the image of shepherd and sheep is still present here; but the mention of a table, of putting oil on the head, the cup, and the Lord’s ‘house,’ all show that the psalm now describes the faithful person as God’s guest at a meal (‘prepare a table’).”⁷

I understand and appreciate their conclusion, but as I have articulated, I am persuaded that these last verses are an unpacking of the opening Shepherd/Sheep metaphor, using more illustrative/poetic language to articulate the core thesis/opening verse and all that it wonderfully contains.

Willem VanGemeren in his commentary on the Psalms also divides Psalm 23 into two separate metaphors, referencing the structure as both simple and complex.⁸

A The Lord Is My Shepherd (vv.1-4)

B The Lord Is My Host (vv.5-6)

Derek Kidner also holds to the psalm having two distinct metaphors. “The shepherd imagery has served its purpose, to be replaced by one of greater intimacy. (The attempt to sustain the first metaphor, which is sometimes made, would turn it through a full circle, picturing men as sheep which are pictured as men—with their table, cup and house – which is hardly a profitable exercise.)”⁹

In response to Kidner, I must admit that as I read more broadly I am feeling increasingly compelled to further examine the two metaphor position and will examine that further this week (and encourage you to work through this important element of the psalm). Further, this split does fall into my earliest observation questions of 23:5 which I have bellow in their raw form:

“It appears that the Shepherd/sheep metaphor is over and the image is of a victorious man (possibly anointed king?).”

“Who are these enemies and how do they fit into the shepherding image?”

I address this to show you that working through the text will at times mean working through different conclusions until you reach a proper resolution. I am still inclined toward a singular metaphor that yields to a wonderful picture that is rooted in this single metaphor and not a separate metaphor altogether. However, even if there are two metaphors in the psalm I do not believe that Kidner’s language is best when he states that “the shepherd imagery has served its purpose” and that the second metaphor achieves a greater intimacy. This to me appears to diminish the magnificence of the Shepherding metaphor. Finally, I still do not understand the necessity of the transition to a second metaphor and if there is not an articulable necessity then why would it be present?

⁶ English Standard Version Study Bible. Crossway Bibles, 2008. (Hereafter: ESV SB) Pg.966

⁷ ESV SB, Pg.966

⁸ VanGemeren, Pg.252

⁹ Derek Kidner; Kidner Classic Commentaries: Psalms 1-72. IVP Academic (Digital Copy), 1973. (Hereafter: Kidner), Pg.129

The LORD is my shepherd.

In terms of authorship we know that David was not the exclusive contributor to the canonized Book of Psalms and that the entirety of Scripture, Old and New Testaments alike, are wholly inspired by the Holy Spirit. So there is a precious kindness and insightful beauty to David, a former shepherd and himself being referred to as the Shepherd-King (2 Samuel 5:2), stating that The LORD (Yahweh) is his shepherd. For any other man of God to make this statement would be no less true, but it would lack some of the poignancy that David provides it. Further, it is most fitting that the Shepherd-King would have an heir sit on his throne, The Son of David, who himself would be The Good Shepherd, David's Shepherd.

But was this relationship restricted to David? Was The LORD's David's Shepherd alone? Why is the psalm articulated with such an apparently limited scope?

The psalm was not restricted to David, The LORD was not exclusively David's Shepherd, and the intimacy expressed here does not restrict the scope of its application, but draws out the personal nature of the relationship that the Shepherd has with his people both corporately and individually.

When addressing the very personal nature of this Psalm, commentator VanGemenen states that the propensity of Israel was to view their relationship with The LORD in a very corporate manner and here it is seen that the relationship is both corporate and individual. "It permits individual believers to take its words on their lips and express in gratitude and confidence that all the demonstration of God's covenantal love can be claimed not only corporately by the group but also personally by each of its members."¹⁰

Arnold Rhodes addresses this too, stating, "God is often referred to directly or indirectly as the shepherd of Israel... but infrequently as the shepherd of an individual. This Psalm is, therefore, all the more remarkable for its emphasis upon God's care of an individual sheep."¹¹

So what is entailed in the image/reality of The LORD being one's shepherd? "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."¹²

Now while Psalm 23 will further develop this core statement, it is important to see what the commentary of Scripture states for itself regarding this role that was loathed by societies throughout history and yet uniquely esteemed by The LORD of Glory. Consequential persons in Redemptive History were occupational shepherds, Israel's leaders were referred to as shepherds, and The LORD himself is both referred to and refers to himself as a Shepherd.

¹⁰ VanGemenen. Pg.253

¹¹ The Layman's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Volume 9. Arnold B. Rhodes. John Knox Press, 1966 (Hereafter: Rhodes), Pg.52

¹² Kidner, Pg.127

Shepherds

Occupational Shepherds

There is a robust history of shepherding among The LORD's people, but particularly among his leadership and distinguished servants, the following are some examples:

Genesis 4:2	Abel was a keeper/shepherd of sheep.
Genesis 29:9	Rachel was a shepherdess.
Genesis 29/30	Jacob shepherded.
Genesis 37:2	Joseph shepherded the flock along with his brothers.
Exodus 3:1	Moses shepherded.
1 Samuel 16:17	David was a faithful shepherd.

Leaders of Israel as Shepherds

Numbers 27:17	Moses, at the end of his life requests that The LORD would not leave Israel without a shepherd to lead them.
2 Samuel 5:2 & 1 Chronicles 11:2	At David's coronation over the full Kingdom of Israel it stated that The LORD had stated to David, "You shall be <i>shepherd</i> of my people Israel...."
2 Samuel 7:7 & 1 Chronicles 17:6	The LORD had commanded the judges of Israel to shepherd his people.
1 Kings 22:17 & 2 Chronicles 18:16	Under fallen leadership Israel was like scattered sheep with no shepherd.
Psalms 78:70-72	"He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand." David was chosen by The Chief Shepherd of Israel, to shepherd the people of Israel, called from among the sheep to shepherd the people.
Jeremiah 3:15	In a context of restorative hope it is stated that The LORD will give his people shepherds after his own heart, shepherds like David, the Shepherd King, and they will care for them by feeding them with knowledge and understanding.
Jeremiah 10:21	Even failed leadership is framed in the context of shepherding, "For the shepherds are stupid and do not inquire of the LORD; therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered."
Jeremiah 17:16	Jeremiah recognizes that among his roles he had been called to be a shepherd.
Ezekiel 37:24	In a context of restoration hope it is stated that the Kingdom of Israel and Judah will be reunited and that "David" (<u>pointing to the Greater David</u>) will be king over them... and they will have one shepherd.

The LORD as Shepherd

"The Lord's self-revelation as 'shepherd' of his people is not merely a metaphor with which his people could clearly relate, but it is one that describes the comprehensive care that he provides for his people."¹³

"Sheep, on the other hand, are *always* completely dependent on their shepherd. They never outgrow their need for the shepherd to care for them, feed them, lead them, and protect them. The shepherd cares for the newborn lambs and is still there when the sheep grow old and weak. Therefore, the imagery of shepherd-sheep captures the comprehensive sovereignty of the shepherd over the sheep and the need of the sheep to yield completely to his care. The good news is that the Lord uses his sovereign power for the well-being of his flock."¹⁴

Genesis 48:15	The first reference to The LORD being a shepherd came from Jacob/Israel who when blessing Joseph's sons stated, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my <i>shepherd</i> all my life long to this day...." (Shepherd: Personal, Jacob/Israel)
Psalms 23:1	David states that The LORD is his shepherd and develops this shepherding care (provision, leading, restoring, caring, and comforting). (Shepherd: Personal, David)
Psalms 28:9	David asks that The LORD would be Israel's shepherd and that he would carry them forever. (Shepherd: Corporate, Israel)
Psalms 78:52	In a context that is recalling the marvelous works of God on behalf of Israel, a concise overview of major elements of Redemptive History to this point, it is stated regarding the Exodus, "The he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock." (Shepherd: Corporate, Israel) <i>Note what this looks like too as this section further develops 78:53-55), the provision and care of the Shepherd:</i> "He led them in safety, so that they were not afraid, but the sea overwhelmed their enemies. And he brought them to his holy land, to the mountain which his right hand had won. He drove out nations before them; he apportioned them for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents." We then observe as the Psalm continues and finishes that he directs this shepherding care for his people through his servant David, the Shepherd-King (see above, Leaders of Israel as Shepherds).
Psalms 80:1	The requests of the psalmist is that The LORD, the Shepherd of Israel, who leads his people like a flock and who is enthroned upon the cherubim, to come and save. (Shepherd: Corporate, Israel)
Isaiah 40:11	In a context of comforting Israel in view of The LORD's person and character it is stated that he will shepherd his people... tending his flock and gathering the lambs in his arms. (Shepherd: Corporate, Israel)
Jeremiah 23:1-8	First a rebuke to the failed/false shepherds, then a promise of good shepherds, and finally a view to the Chief Shepherd. "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. Therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: 'You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not

¹³ The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church. Timothy Z. Witmer. P&R Publishing, 2010. (Hereafter: Witmer), Pg.13

¹⁴ Witmer, Pg.13

attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD. 'Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.' 'Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when they shall no longer say, 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' but 'As the LORD lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' Then they shall dwell in their own land.'"

Jeremiah 31:10

In a context of magnificent restoration promise to Israel it is stated, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock."

Ezekiel 34:1-24

What David spoke in a united and strong kingdom captured the very heart of The LORD as reflected in Ezekiel's prophecy of both rebuke and preeminent restoration, David articulated that The LORD was his shepherd and Ezekiel demonstrated just how magnificent this truth was and is... pointing to the Son of David, Israel's Chief Shepherd-King.

"The word of the LORD came to me: 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. 'Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them. 'For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. 'As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is it not enough

for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet? 'Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken."

Micah 5:4

Reference to Messiah... "And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD...."

Shall Not Lack

"Old age with its feebleness shall not bring me any lack, and even death with its gloom shall not find me destitute. I have all things and abound; not because I have skill and wit with which to win my bread, but because '*The Lord is my Shepherd*.' The wicked always want, but the righteous never; a sinner's heart is far from satisfaction, but a gracious spirit dwells in the palace of content."¹⁵

The scope of which David is speaking when he states that he "shall not lack" is comprehensive and includes not just the essential elements of physical sustenance, but that which will also satisfy and sustain his inner man. The images immediately provided are physical provision, but their application is immediately seen to be much more comprehensive and to fail to see some measure of unity between the scope of provision is to not understand he who supplies what is needed.

When David speaks of not being deficient in a need he speaks from the vantage point of Redemptive History as well as from experience.

Exodus 16:13-21 The LORD provided mana for the Israelites in the wilderness and the people gathered and did *not lack*.

Deuteronomy 2:7 The LORD provided for the people of Israel during their forty years of wilderness wondering and they did *not lack*.

Deuteronomy 8:7-10 Israel was transitioning from forty years of provision to being given a wonderful land of their own in which they "*will lack nothing*."
 "For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you."

Psalms 34:10 David later testifies in the Psalms, "...those who seek the LORD lack no good thing."

This brings me to address the scope of the application of The LORD being David's Shepherd and Israel's Shepherd. While Psalm 23 is very personal in its immediate context the application is both personal and cooperate, just as David would not lack, so "...those who seek the LORD lack no good thing." This is because

¹⁵ Charles Spurgeon; The Treasury of David, Volume 1 – Psalms 1-57. Hendrickson Publishers. (Hereafter: Spurgeon), Pg.354

The LORD is both David's Shepherd and all faithful Israel's Shepherd too as demonstrated in several cooperate verses and as again drawn out here.

The English Standard Version Study Bible draws this out well, stating, "when they sing this psalm, they see his majesty in the way he personally attends to each of his covenant lambs. He is the shepherd for Israel as a whole; and in being such, he is the shepherd for each faithful Israelite as well."¹⁶

"To say, 'The LORD is my shepherd, 'is also to say, 'I shall not want.'"¹⁷

Matthew 6:25-34 The Lord provides for his own and his provision does not *lack*.

23:2

Green Pastures and Still Waters

He makes... and he leads. Do sheep have to be made to lie down in green pastures? Is this partially satisfying his "not wanting"? Yes and yes. Sheep have to know that there is provision and that they are secure before they will take to a resting position on the ground and these elements of provision and security are outside of themselves and require that they be wholly shepherd dependent to enjoy proper rest. Those whom The LORD Shepherds know this rest as his provisions are sure and his protection is absolute.

Green pastures were a luxury enjoyed even in the desert during the winter and spring – affording the sheep the opportunity to have a steady and generous context for feeding without having to be moved from place to place in search for provision and this would afford the sheep the ability to rest, to lie down. The still/quiet waters were also indicative of a peaceful context of provision.¹⁸ However, The LORD is not limited to seasonal care, but always provides that which is good in its provision and that which will afford his faithful rest. Though as we will see there are dark valleys to traverse too and this is all under his perfect care.

Beginning with the familiar image of the natural care a shepherd provides David further develops just how magnificent and comprehensive his Shepherd's care truly was for him.

The Shepherd Leads His Sheep, A Provisional Lead. From the time that The LORD redeemed and drew his people out of Egypt he has provisionally led them... through the wilderness and into his promised land and those who know this Good Shepherd continued to seek his leading of them.

23:3

Restoration of Soul

He restores... and he leads.

Restore: Return to an original or proper condition.

Soul: The inner man, the essence of one's person.

"The restoration, refreshment, or revival of the soul (or life) indicates the returning of life or vitality."¹⁹

¹⁶ ESV SB, Pg.966

¹⁷ Rhodes, Pg.52

¹⁸ VanGemeren, Pgs.253-254

¹⁹ ESV SB, Pg.966

The refreshment and satisfaction in The LORD is absolute and complete. David is testifying to not only being provided for with continued welfare, but for being restoratively cared for by his Shepherd. However, this restorative care is more than binding injuries, it is caring for one's inner man – his whole person.

Paths of Righteousness

Righteous: That which is absolutely true, right, and just - finding its purest and complete application in The LORD, it is at the essence of his character to do that which is perfectly true, right, and just.

David is being led by The Righteous Shepherd in ways that honor him and reflect the perfections of his character - that which is righteous or true, right, and just - these are not only good, but to the chief benefit of man and therefore a preeminent care to him.

VanGemenen develops this leading on paths of righteousness directly through the shepherding metaphor and states that it is not leading one to obtain righteousness, but is leading on right paths and this is an element of protection and care. These are the most direct paths and less wearisome for the sheep.²⁰

The New English Translation of the Bible also makes this conclusion as reflected in their translation of 23:3, "He leads me down the right paths for the sake of his reputation."²¹

His Name's Sake

For his name's sake - The LORD is acting on behalf of himself, and this is good.

This restoration and leading is The Good Shepherd's care of his own and he does this for the greatest good which surpasses their welfare and joy, it excels to his own reputation and magnification (the chief ends of man - glorifying God and in this faithful care of his own he is also affording them the high privilege of participating in their own chief good, making much of him). To present we have not addressed this subject in our Psalm's study and while it is sufficiently addressed at other times it is worth again noting here that having a high or right view of God and a proper view of man is so essential it is fundamentally taken for granted in this study, but it comes down to this: if God would seek someone or something else's good or exultation or glory over his own he is effectively committing idolatry which is inherently impossible, but this is what contemporary Evangelical Culture would frequently seek (esteeming man over God if only in the most 'pragmatic' ways). *When we fail to see that our chief good is God's exultation and that he was not desperate to secure our affections and even salvation then we have made ourselves Lord and have no proper affection or understanding of the One True LORD as revealed through the Scriptures.*

When he leads David, Israel, and in his unfathomable kindness even us in paths of righteousness it is because this first and foremost makes much of him and it is for his name's sake and we are the beneficiaries and this is a kindness that we are fools to take for granted and that we will never properly comprehend. Do not forget the question posed in Psalm 8:4, "...what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" If this bothers you then I am grateful because coming to terms with these wonderful truths will advance you toward one of our chief goals of this season in the Psalms, that you might become better worshipers of God. We would do well to mimic John the Baptist in his relationship with Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease." John 3:30

²⁰ VanGemenen, Pg.254

²¹ NET Bible, Version 2.0 Digital Copy through the Lumina App, full information and full copies available at bible.org. (Hereafter: NET)

The LORD acting and being asked to act for his own name's sake, the most consistent and right thing to do:

1 Samuel 12:22	"For the LORD will not forsake his people, for <u>his great name's sake</u> , because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself."
Psalms 23:3	"He leads me in paths of righteousness for <u>his name's sake</u> ."
Psalms 25:11	"For <u>your name's sake</u> , O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great."
Psalms 31:3	"For you are my rock and my fortress; and for <u>your name's sake</u> you lead me and guide me..."
Psalms 79:9	"Help us, O God of our salvation, for <u>the glory of your name</u> ; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for <u>your name's sake</u> !"
Psalms 106:8	"Yet he saved them for <u>his name's sake</u> , that he might make known his mighty power."
Psalms 109:21	"But you, O GOD my Lord, deal on my behalf for <u>your name's sake</u> ; because your steadfast love is good, deliver me!"
Isaiah 48:9	"For <u>my name's sake</u> I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off."
Isaiah 48:11	"For <u>my own sake</u> , for <u>my own sake</u> , I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another."
Ezekiel 20:9	"But I acted for <u>the sake of my name</u> , that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt."
Ezekiel 20:14	"But I acted for <u>the sake of my name</u> , that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out."
Ezekiel 20:22	"But I withheld my hand and acted for <u>the sake of my name</u> , that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out."
Ezekiel 20:44	"And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for <u>my name's sake</u> , not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD."
Ezekiel 36:22	"Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for <u>the sake of my holy name</u> , which you have profaned among the nations to which you came."

David's inner man has been refreshingly restored more perfectly than the binding up of a lamb, and he is led not simply to good things, but to the best, to righteousness, and these cares and provisions are not on account of the sheep but the Shepherd.

The Shepherd Leads His Sheep, A Directional Lead. From the time that The LORD redeemed and drew his people out of Egypt he has directionally led them... through the wilderness and into his promised land and those who know this Good Shepherd continued to seek his leading of them.

23:4

Walking Through the Valley

I walk... and I will fear not.

Shadow of Death: The Hebrew term is in the Old Testament seventeen times and only translated "shadow of death" four times - each such time is in the Psalms. Thirteen other times it is translated: Deep Shadow, Deep Darkness, Gloom.

"Phraseology used to convey a perilously threatening environment."²²

The shadow of death is referred to as "...an epithet of the most fearful darkness...."²³

As other commentators have concluded the reference to "the valley of the shadow of death" may have been an illustrative picture of the deep ravines that shepherds and their sheep would have to traverse at times, but VanGemeren further unites his "right" or "righteous" paths as perhaps necessarily going through such places in that they are the most direct even if they are with elements of danger.²⁴ The elements of danger being the unknowns of beast, nature, and foe, but even here the shepherd is their companion and leader and they need not fear any evil.

James Boice further comments on traversing these dark valleys and states, "It is important to note that 'the valley of the shadow of death' is as much God's right path for us as the 'green pastures' which lie beside 'quiet waters.'"²⁵

The Good Shepherd makes... he leads... he restores... he leads... and here he accompanies, therefore though I walk through the valley, I will fear not.

Rod and Staff

The Shepherd's tools were his rod and his staff, particularly valuable in dark place. They were the tools of direction and protection²⁶ and a means of guidance and defense.²⁷ The rod was for the clubbing of wild animals and the staff was to keep the sheep under control.²⁸

"The rod and staff represent God's constant vigilance over his own and bring 'comfort' because of his personal presence and involvement with his sheep."²⁹

These tools comfort, they restore one to a better disposition, they help to see that the sheep are satisfied with one's care, and ultimately because they are in the hands of their accompanying shepherd they provide peaceful rest through hardship.

In the midst of chief darkness David finds comfort and solace in the care of The LORD. Then from this apparent lowest of places he appears to transition to the most complete applications of the abundance of care he receives. It is not just that he is secure from harm - he is also secure in abundance.

²² MacArthur, Pg.762

²³ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 5 – Psalms. Hendrickson Publishers, 2001. (Hereafter: Keil & Delitzsch), Pg.208

²⁴ VanGemeren, Pg.254

²⁵ Boice, Pg.211

²⁶ MacArthur, Pg.762

²⁷ Keil & Delitzsch, Pg.208

²⁸ VanGemeren, Pg.253

²⁹ VanGemeren, Pg.253

23:5

"I shall not want." I understand these last two verses as the fuller reflections of The Shepherd's abundant provisions – whereas the metaphor may have subsided its poetry has not and I see this as the natural overflow of the magnificent truths articulated in picture above here seen with poetic emphasis in the natural realm of man. David is showing with poetic emphasis that this is what it looks like to walk with The LORD as one's Shepherd. It is not that he has exhausted the metaphor and is moving along to another one, but that not being able to exhaust it he explores its immediate outworkings of celebratory provision, of kind blessing, of unparalleled hope, and a satisfaction that can rest in The LORD's presence.

The Shepherd's care has demonstrated itself to be more than provisional, but abundantly provisional and this becomes increasingly clear as there is abundance in the presence of enemies, refreshment, provisions, and spiritual satisfaction.

A Prepared Table

The prepared table effectively sets the context for the celebratory blessing. It is the stage on which The LORD will exercise his kind abundance toward those in his affectionate care.

A Silenced Enemy

It is unclear what the status of these enemies are beyond that they are in opposition to David and thereby in opposition to The LORD (see Psalm 2 Study Guide). What is clear is that in the midst of The LORD's good provision and care they are left to only observe – either in submission or are simply impotent to contend with the sheep under the blessing and care of the Shepherd.

Anointed Head

The anointed head here appears to reflect one who is fully satisfied and refreshed. You can better understand this and even distinguish it from the frequent references of anointing priests and kings with two references from the Gospels that capture the exercising of this Jewish blessing performed for one another and refreshment for oneself.

Luke 7:46 "You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment."

Matthew 6:17-18 "But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

John MacArthur further explains that anointing with oil also conveys one who is blessed or in blessed context and draws this out with the following Scriptures.³⁰

Psalm 45:7 "Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions"

Psalm 92:10 "But you have exalted my horn like that of the wild ox; you have poured over me fresh oil."

Psalm 14:15 "...and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart."

³⁰ MacArthur, Pg.762

You can imagine that in a primarily arid context that does not have packaged lotions and moisturizing soaps at one's immediate disposal how refreshing and in turn what an immediate blessing it would be to have oil poured over one's head. Do not lose sight of the value of this blessing when peering through the lens of your artificial abundance of comfort.

An Overflowing Cup

This appears to be a poignant image of abundance. One has been provided and the provision is beyond what can naturally be contained. Again, it is framed in the context of a celebratory image: a prepared table, anointing with oil, and now an overflowing cup. It is enough that The Shepherd generously provides, gives rest, cares for, leads, and protects, but he does far more for his beloved.

A Second Metaphor – *Worthy of Consideration*

Identifying the last two verses as a second metaphor, The LORD as a Host, VanGemeran sees the image being one in which the honored guest at a banquet would be anointed with perfumed oil by his host. He also sees the cup as a symbol of entertainment and its overflowing reflecting the Lord as giving his best. Further, he ties these abundant and good provision here back to the abundance and good provisions expressed by the green pastures and still waters.³¹ These are helpful insights and are part of the reason that I see more continuity with the psalm as a whole, but dividing it as VanGemeran and others have may very well be a more accurate structuring with the two metaphors as parallels so I hold my conclusion with a respectful charity.

C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch state the following regarding this expression of blessing that David articulates here, "After the figure of the shepherd fades away in v.4, that of the host appears. His enemies must look quietly on (Psalm 31:20), without being able to do anything, and see how Jahve provides bountifully for His guest, anoints him with sweet perfumes as at a joyous and magnificent banquet (Psalm 92:11), and fills his cup to excess."³²

23:6

Pursued by Goodness and Mercy/Love

He leads... he leads... I walk... and now "goodness and mercy follow."

Mercy, Kindness, Love they Follow, they Pursue.

Keil and Delitzsch make an argument that the historical context of Psalm 23 can be, with confidence, placed at the time that David was a fugitive from Israel under Absalom's rebellion. I have read their argument for this and am not persuaded to present, but with this conclusion they obviously see various elements of the Psalm through a certain contextual paradigm. Most striking of those, to me, was that while being pursued by enemies in the immediate context they draw out that David also states that he will continually be pursued by goodness and mercy/love all the days of his life and that these elements/blessings will functionally overtake his natural pursuers. Now, while I do not see the historical context being as clearly defensible as Keil and Delitzsch, I do appreciate their bringing this to light if only in a general and not precise application as David was a man who knew what it was like to be pursued from his youth to his later years, yet David clearly knew his greater pursuers (revealed to be goodness and mercy/love) would and did prove to be dispatched not by his enemies but by his Shepherd.

³¹ VanGemeran, Pg.255

³² Keil & Delitzsch, Pg.208 (Note that I clarified the cross references made in the quote by adding the term "Psalm" and I did redact a Hebrew term that was provided in the first cross reference as I do not have the capacity to reproduce it properly in this format and do not believe to have done harm or foster misrepresentation.)

House of The LORD

David states that goodness and mercy/love will pursue him all the days of his life - he enjoys and anticipates an enduring and complete care from his Shepherd, and it is his Shepherd's presence that he craves and finds his chief satisfaction over every other abundance and provision. For just as the Shepherd acts on his own behalf so every good thing finds its source in him, and David longs for the source even over the provision. This is most clearly expressed in his consistently longing and satisfaction with being in the House of The LORD or his presence.

David again is finding his chief satisfaction in being in the presence of The LORD. His place of great longing is The LORD's abode and here he would gladly remain as he has insatiable desire to be with his Good Shepherd. Psalm 27:4 "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple."

For a more complete consideration of this please see the Study Guide on Psalm 15.

Forever or Length of Days... is possibly an example of the second line of the parallel being more intense/strong than the preceding. The translation footnote on the New English Translation states that the phrase "...is traditionally translated 'forever.' However, this phrase, when used elsewhere of people, usually refers to a lengthy period of time, such as one's lifetime, and does not mean 'forever' in the sense of eternity."³³

It appears to be an expression of the full length of David's days... so long as he has breath in his lungs his desire is for the place of The LORD's presence.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd

As proposed in the introduction to this Study Guide I am persuaded that the primary attraction of Psalm 23 to those who know the Lord is its very core statement/truth, "The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want." I think this is made quite plain through the development of the psalm, but when attention is given, as I did my best to provide, to the development and expectation of the Chief Shepherd throughout the Old Testament Scriptures it becomes all the clearer and invigorates a fire in one's soul to desire to walk with him as Shepherd and sheep. There is also a tension that naturally develops when attention is given to the failed shepherding of Israel's under-shepherds and the longing for the promises of David's Greater Son and his own Shepherd-King. Jesus unambiguously showed himself to be this promised Shepherd-King, the Good Shepherd himself.

Matthew 6:25-34	The Good Shepherd calls to end anxiety over provision as he competently and generously supplies what is needed to those who seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.
Matthew 11:2-6	The Good Shepherd comprehensively cares for his own: healing and restoring souls. "...the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." (11:5)
Matthew 11:28-30	The Good Shepherd gives light burdens and rest for souls that come to him.
Mark 6:34	The Good Shepherd has compassion for the sheep with no shepherd.
John 6:1-59	The Good Shepherd provides sustenance for his own and what he provides will sustain their whole person and is God's good gift for them.

³³ NET, Footnote Psalm 23:6

John 10:1-18

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, therefore, I shall not want. “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.’ This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. *The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.* He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, **one shepherd.** For this reason the Father loves me, because *I lay down my life that I may take it up again.* No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

John 14:27

The Good Shepherd provides unparalleled peace. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

Under-Shepherds of the Good Shepherd

In his book on Pastoral Ministry, Timothy Witmer, provides the thesis of his book and of the work of Pastoral Office, “The fundamental responsibility of church leaders is to shepherd God’s flock.”³⁴ The New Testament Pastor has been charged by the Chief Shepherd to shepherd the flock of God. Any other activity outside of this is superfluous and can be disposed of if necessary and any other activity that impedes this is unacceptable and requires the most expedient purging possible. “Failure to shepherd, therefore, impacts church health.”³⁵ It is therefore, my great longing that I might join the company of David, “With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand.” Psalm 78:72 “The care of the Lord for his people is to be reflected in those whom he calls to lead.”³⁶

³⁴ Witmer, Pg.2

³⁵ Witmer, Pg.3

³⁶ Witmer, Pg.14

This charge to shepherd God's flock is poignantly clear when viewed through the Apostle Peter who, after denying his precious Lord three times, is restored with three charges.

John 21:15-17

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, '**Feed my lambs.**'

He said to him a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, '**Tend my sheep.**'

He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' and he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, '**Feed my sheep.**'"

This restored Under-Shepherd went on to charge those to whom would continue the work of Under-Shepherds of the Good Shepherd's Church.

1 Peter 5:1-4

"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: **shepherd the flock of God that is among you**, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. *And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*"

An Opportunity To Respond With Song: The King of Love My Shepherd Is

"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead **our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep**, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

Hebrews 13:20-21