

Matt Henry
Psalm 23
22 July 2018

“Psalm of Calm”

Grace and peace...

The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, and that may be true when it comes to your yard this time of year. But when it comes to the Scriptures, there's no greener pasture than Psalm 23. It's perfect! Practically every Christian loves Psalm 23 and is drawn to it. What's not to love about it? It's relational and reassuring. Just read it and your blood pressure drops a couple points as a sense of calmness comes over you. It is impossible to mess up Psalm 23! We love Psalm 23 because it's the Gospel. This is who God is, this is what He does for me in the present, this is what my future looks like thanks to Him! But just imagine for a moment, what life would be like if we didn't have Psalm 23 and all the assurance that comes with it. Can you even imagine what that would be like to not know God and be cared for by Him?

David Powlison can. And he wrote an anti-psalm 23 that describes life apart from God. Try not to be depressed as I read it! But it will make you appreciate all the more of what we do have because whatever is promised in Psalm 23, Powlison describes the opposite angle when we live apart from God. Here's the anti-psalm 23.

I'm on my own.

No one looks out for me or protects me.

I experience a continual sense of need. Nothing's quite right.

I'm always restless. I'm easily frustrated and often disappointed.

It's a jungle — I feel overwhelmed. It's a desert — I'm thirsty.

My soul feels broken, twisted, and stuck. I can't fix myself.

I stumble down some dark paths.

Still, I insist: I want to do what I want, when I want, how I want.

But life's confusing. Why don't things ever really work out?

I'm haunted by emptiness and futility — shadows of death.

I fear the big hurt and final loss.

Death is waiting for me at the end of every road,

but I'd rather not think about that.

I spend my life protecting myself. Bad things can happen.

I find no lasting comfort.

I'm alone ... facing everything that could hurt me.

Are my friends really friends?

Other people use me for their own ends.

I can't really trust anyone. No one has my back.

No one is really for me — except me.

And I'm so much all about ME, sometimes it's sickening.

I belong to no one except myself.

My cup is never quite full enough. I'm left empty.

Disappointment follows me all the days of my life.

Will I just be obliterated into nothingness?

Will I be alone forever, homeless, free-falling into void?

Sartre said, "Hell is other people."

I have to add, "Hell is also myself."

It's a living death, and then I die.

Powlison writes: And when you're caught up in the antipsalm, it doesn't help when you're labeled a "disorder," a "syndrome" or a "case." The problem is much more serious: The disorder is "my life." The syndrome is "I'm on my own." The case is "Who am I and what am I living for?" when too

clearly I am the center of my story. That is a good definition of a “living death”.

But when Jesus is the center, everything changes. We realize we’re not alone, we’re actually meant to be and invited to be under the care of a loving and capable Shepherd. He is the God who protects, provides and assures us of His presence.

Psalm 23 is written by David who was a shepherd and then became a king as we know. And it’s written about the Shepherd King named Jesus. There’s so much in the Scriptures about sheep and shepherding, the motif is almost overplayed really, if that were possible. But as far as Psalm 23 goes, from whose perspective, from whose vantage point is it written—sheep or shepherd? It’s written from the sheep’s perspective. That’s why we like it so much. It’s about what we have to gain by being sheep under the care of the shepherd who is Jesus.

This week I was driving down Fairview, I think, and I saw this church sign: “The lamb who died to save you is the shepherd who lives to care for you.” It got at how, rather profoundly, Jesus fulfills both roles of shepherd and lamb. There may be more reason for this from a literary point of view.

There is an opinion among some rabbis that Psalm 23 does not stand alone. They say it is actually part of a larger text—that Psalm 22, 23 and 24 are

considered as a whole. Why does this matter? Because Psalm 22 is the crucifixion psalm. Jesus quotes it from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And then what follows is a vivid description of agony on the cross. Then we have the Shepherd Psalm of Calm 23. Then Psalm 24 is all about glory, the King of glory who triumphs in might and conquest. What I am saying is you can make a case that Psalm 22, 23, 24—if it’s a unit that is meant to go together—it goes together just as Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection go together. You can apply Psalm 22 to Good Friday, Psalm 24 to Easter Sunday. And Psalm 23—why would that fit with the Saturday in the tomb? Because at it’s heart, you have someone walking through the valley of the shadow of death and yet he is unafraid.

I have read Psalm 23 at when someone was near death. I visited Lance in the hospice center; he was in his 50s as I recall. He was a believer and he was in the final stages of cancer. Tubes showed organs were shutting down. Shallow breathing. Eyes closed. His mother was there and we both could tell, death was setting in. I started reading Psalm 23 to Lance. And in the middle of it, he opened his eyes and gave one final deep inhaling breath. But friends, I can only tell you, it wasn’t the breath of exhaustion. I know what that sounds like. This was the breath of taking in delight, of someone who was seeing glory. Lance was looking

right above my head, but it was more like he was looking through me, as I believe the dimension of glory had opened up for him to see in that moment. He closed his eyes. I finished the psalm. His mother wept. And we knew that Lance had gone to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. It was such a spiritual experience and Psalm 23, for me, is connected to that holy moment of his passing through the valley of the shadow of death.

What I'd like to do next, in order to make this psalm something that we use in daily life, is to examine and dig into some of the phrases and terms. There's much more here than I can do in one sermon, in fact, this single psalm could carry us through a whole Lenten series, but here's what I see.

Yahweh is my shepherd. Not just a shepherd, but my shepherd. So this psalm is about having a personal relationship with God, that acknowledges our need for Him. Sheep can't make it on their own. Yahweh is not just a shepherd, but my shepherd, and as such, He has total rights to us as well as responsibilities for us.

He makes me lie down in "green pastures". Sheep don't lay down unless they are free from fear and annoyance. They don't lie down unless they are assured they have what they need, such as food. Green pastures don't just happen in an arid desert climate that typifies the biblical climate. They are a

result of the shepherd's provision. Instead of expending all their energy scouring a dried up hillside, the sheep eat quickly in the green pastures and then they rest. "still waters"—sheep don't drink from moving water. They don't like it. They have a fear of drowning because sheep can't swim. So they need water of course, but only in a way that endanger them. Again, this reminds us of God's provision for us.

"his name's sake"—the shepherd acts not only for our good, but for his name's sake. He acts so He has a reputation! His care for us is meant to give Him glory. This is how God desires to be known.

"through the valley"—not around the valley, but through the valley of the shadow of death. We will all die one day. This is the inevitable outcome. But we do not fear it because He is with us. He's already gone through death and overcome it.

"rod and staff"—these are two different things. The rod is more like a weapon. It can be launched and thrown. It can club whatever needs clubbing. It protects.

The staff reassures. It's what the shepherd leans on, walks with. The staff guides the sheep. It is a symbol of concern. The staff is what touches the sheep.

Physical contact that shows attention and connection. It is like Jesus putting His hand on your shoulder.

These observations and more can be found in this little book that's a classic...from the foreword of **"A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23"** by Philip Keller.

Do I really belong to Him?

Do I really recognize His right to me?

Do I respond to His authority and acknowledge His ownership?

Do I find freedom and complete fulfillment in this arrangement?

Do I sense a purpose and deep contentment because I am under His direction?

Do I know rest and repose, besides a definite sense of exciting adventure, in belonging to Him?

If so, then with genuine gratitude and exaltation, I can exclaim proudly, just as David did. "The Lord is my Shepherd!" and I'm thrilled to belong to Him for is it thus that I shall flourish and thrive no matter what life may bring me."

And just what does the Lord bring us for life?

You may have seen this before, but it's something that is actually worthwhile. Just breaking down the psalm, we see what God provides for us.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd...that's **relationship!**

I shall not be in want....that's **supply!**

He makes me lie down in green pastures...that's **rest!**

He leads me beside quiet waters...that's **refreshment!**

He restores my soul....that's **healing!**

He leads me in paths of righteousnessthat's **guidance!**

for his name's sake...that's **purpose!**

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil...that's **protection!**

for you are with me...that's **faithfulness!**

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me...that's **comfort!**

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...that's **hope!**

You anoint my head with oil...that's **consecration!**

My cup overflows...that's **abundance!**

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life...that's

blessing!

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord...that's **security!**

Forever—that's **eternity!**

In Jesus' name, Amen.