

Psalms 23 is one of the dearest passages of the Bible. This beautiful poem about God and his people speaks directly to the joys and fears of ANY HUMAN BEING. It is a beautiful reminder that God is caring and compassionate. It also reminds us that, like sheep, we depend on God's care and provision --- EVERY DAY!

The language of the psalms comes from the life in the fields with sheep. To many urban dwellers, the concepts and metaphors in the Psalms are unfamiliar. By exploring words and images in context, one can better understand the message and appreciate the beauty of this favorite psalm.

Psalms 23:

¹ *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.* ² *He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters,* ³ *He restore my soul. He guides me along the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

⁴ *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*

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

⁶ *Surely your goodness and mercy (love) will follow me all the days of my life, and I WILL DWELL in the house of the LORD forever.*

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

MEANING: Sheep are able to recognize their shepherd and carry on a simple relationship with him. They are docile creatures and are capable of giving and receiving affection. Care for the sheep means OWNERSHIP of them. Shepherds often MARK their sheep with a notch in the ear or by some other distinguishing mark.

APPLICATION: We are like sheep under God's care and guidance. We BELONG to God in two ways: 1) We belong to God because He CREATED us, and 2) We belong to him because he SAVED us. As 'believers' we are called to live, suffer, and bear His mark of LOVE (Phil. 3:10; John 17:20-23)

How do we show other people that we have the MARK of Jesus on us? How do you experience God's care in your life?

I SHALL NOT BE IN WANT

MEANING: My deepest needs shall be met. I need not desire more. Sheep may develop a habit of wandering off the shepherd's pastureland in search of "greener pastures." Because they have few defenses, safety in numbers is necessary for survival. A stray sheep is easy prey and the watchful protection of a caring shepherd is crucial to sheep that have a

tendency to wander. Sheep have differing personality traits and stubborn sheep may teach other of the heard to wander.

APPLICATION: We can trust God's provision and care for us.

HE MAKES ME LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES

MEANING: God makes me free to rest. Sheep will not rest unless they are free from conflicts with other sheep, free from predators, free from pests, and free from hunger. The shepherd must protect the sheep from problems outside and inside the herd. The shepherd has to find feeding grounds where the sheep can eat safely – a place without parasites, predators that endanger the sheep, and with plenty of green pastures where the sheep can eat and rest safely.

APPLICATION: We can rest in God's security and provision. How does God give you rest? What does it mean for you to "lie down in green pastures?"

HE LEADS BE BESIDE STILL WATERS

MEANING: God supplies me with SAFE, LIFE-GIVING drink. Sheep need FRESH, clear water, but they will not drink from waters moving too swiftly. This is because sheep are NOT GOOD SWIMMERS, especially when they are laden down with a heavy woolen coat. But the GOOD SHEPHERD WILL NOT let them drink from the filthy contaminated pools either. HE WILL lead the sheep to the still waters.

APPLICATION: We can drink deeply of God's Holy Spirit who is water to our thirsty souls.

HE RESTORES MY SOUL

MEANING: God cares for and keeps my heart and mind. Sheep may become "cast" – stuck on their backs, unable to get up. A downcast sheep is one that has rolled over into a depression and cannot right itself to stand. In this condition, a sheep struggling to raise itself may quickly become dehydrated in the summer sun. A cast sheep is also easy prey for wild animals. Top heavy, body down in a hole, legs flailing the air, a sheep in this state is a funny sight to see --- funny, but also helpless.

APPLICATION: We can trust God for the needs of the body and the spirit. How has God restored your soul?

HE GUIDES ME IN PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR HIS NAME'S SAKE

MEANING: God will lead us on the right path because of his great promise. Sheep are creatures of habit. By overgrazing, they will eventually destroy their own pastures. They must be led to a new

pastureland. Only the shepherd knows the best pasture and the best way to get there and he will lead them because the sheep are in his name.

APPLICATION: We are to follow God's way, not our own destructive ways.

Are there any paths in your journey that you need to leave?

EVEN THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH, I WILL FEAR NO EVIL, FOR YOU ARE WITH ME

MEANING: **God knows and deals with MY FEARS about the deadly dangers of life.** Valleys on the way to the high pastureland often have the best grass because they contain water and the sun has not dried out the grass, but they can also be places of dark danger for the sheep.

APPLICATION: We can trust God even when he appears to lead us into a scary place.

Have you walked through the "valley of the shadow of death" in your life and felt God's comforting presence with you in any way?

YOUR ROD AND YOUR STAFF, THEY COMFORT ME

MEANING: **God, your discipline and guidance make me feel safe.** Notice the change in personal pronouns – from "he" to "you" – here in the middle of the poem/The Psalmist's address to God becomes more personal. It is like the sheep's need to learn to trust in the shepherd. The shepherd's rod protects and disciplines, the staff guides and saves.

APPLICATION: We can trust in God's guidance and his discipline as assuring and positive.

How have you felt God's comfort in your life during times of grief or problems?

YOU PREPARE A TABLE BEFORE ME IN THE PRESENCE OF MY ENEMIES

MEANING: **God, you provide for my hunger even when my enemies surround me.** Often the shepherd must prepare the pasture to remove poisonous plants. Natural predators often wait at the margins of the tableland for a chance to attack. The shepherd must be on guard.

APPLICATION: We can be confident that God will take care of our needs, even when we are hated or in danger.

How have you seen God acting to favor you even when the odds were against you?

YOU ANOINT MY HEAD WITH OIL

MEANING: **God, you take care of my bodily needs.** Flying insects often plague the sheep in the summer months. Oil is a natural bug repellent and emollient that aids in healing the skin. Palestinian

shepherds used a mixture of oil, sulfur, and spices applied especially around the head. The shepherds would use this mixture to care for the sheep. In addition, pouring oil on someone's head was also an act of hospitality, offering a way for guests to clean and refresh themselves. The psalmist here is grateful for God's hospitality.

APPLICATION: We are to trust God to provide for the needs of the body. If you make a list of the many things you have, can you see God's hand providing for your needs and more?

MY CUP OVERFLOWS

MEANING: **My provision from God is abundant.** The good shepherd provides more than the bare necessities to his sheep. He is willing to take the sheep to better grazing and water sources even if it means cost and danger. Jesus was willing to die for his sheep (John 10:15). If he is willing to give his life, he is willing to give anything that we need (Matthew 6:25-34).

APPLICATION: We can rest assured that God will more than provide for us.

SURELY GOODNESS AND LOVE WILL FOLLOW ME ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE

MEANING: **God's goodness and grace will be with me my whole life.** Sheep, when properly managed and cared for, can aid in the fertility of the land, transforming wilderness into parkland and fertile fields. The good shepherd's blessing follows his sheep. We can see God's loving blessing on his people, not only on individual basis, but also for our benefit alone. Often God's blessings extend from each of God's people or from the church itself and become blessings for others as well.

APPLICATION: We can be certain that God will always be with us for blessing.

How can you identify God's goodness in different areas of your life?

AND I WILL DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD FOREVER

MEANING: **I shall live eternally with God.** Sheep, after spending the summer in the high pastures, are taken back to the shepherd's property in the fall and the winter. In the psalm, "dwelling in the house of the LORD" may mean to live within the realm of God's provision and protection. For Christians, it also may mean a certainty of God's love for the church (Romans 8:35-39).

APPLICATION: Our lives are secure forever in Christ, the Good Shepherd.