

CHRIST COVENANT CHURCH

Sermon Transcript

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Psalm 23

The Good Life Under the Good Shepherd

Date of Sermon: 10-19-2025 PM

Lord Jesus, we come before you this evening open, needing to hear your word, needing to see you as our good shepherd, Lord. And so, we need you to feed us. We need you to lead us. We need you to guide us and protect us, Lord. We need your life within us, your word within us, your Spirit at work. So, oh Lord, I pray that you would take these words that will be spoken in these next few minutes and apply them to our minds and our hearts as we study Psalm 23 together. We pray it in your name. Amen.

Well, we'll be in Psalm 23, a most familiar passage to probably all of us. Psalm 23. Hear the word of the Lord:

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
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.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Well, if you are a betting man or a betting woman, which I trust none of you are, when we announced this series of pastors' favorite passages, you could probably place a safe bet that Psalm 23 would be one passage that we would hear in this series. And so, here it is this evening. Psalm 23 – one of my favorite passages, probably your favorite passage. It's a go-to passage, and we know it's often read at funerals. We often turn to it in times of tribulation or times of trial. It's a psalm of comfort to so many of us. But not only that, it is a psalm for everyday life, because it's a psalm of quiet confidence about who God is for us. And it's simply this – the driving point of the psalm that God is our good shepherd. God is our good shepherd. That's the theme of this passage and the sermon tonight.

Now, I understand it's a Sunday night crowd, and we all believe this – God is our good shepherd – but it's easy to lose sight of that reality and even to fail to work out the implications of it in our lives. I think we can find ourselves even indeed living outside of that faith and confidence on a daily basis. This was made more poignant to me when I came across an article on Psalm 23 written by David

Powlison. And many of you know David Powlison was a counselor, a well-known counselor, with CCEF, and he had so much years of experience and wisdom for people. And he found that many people do not live in the reality – as he met with them, he began he began to understand that many people, even Christians, do not live in the reality of Psalm 23. In fact, he found that most people live in a different reality. And I wonder how you might respond to this this evening. He wrote something called the anti-psalm. And it's along the progression of Psalm 23, except with the opposite convictions. And so, let me read it to you. Here it is. The anti-psalm. Think of the verses that we just read.

"I am on my own.
No one looks out for me or protects me.
I experience a continual sense of need.
Nothing is 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 path.
Still, I insist. I want to do what I want, when I want, and how I want.
But life is confusing. Why don't things ever really work out?
I'm haunted by emptiness and futility. The shadows of death.
I fear the big hurt, the 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 all alone facing everything that could hurt me.
Are my friends really my 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.
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 the void?
Sarta said, 'Hell is other people.' I have to add, 'Hell is also myself.'
It's a living death, and then I die."

Well, thank you very much, Pastor Wells, for that anti-psalm. I read it to Michelle, and she said, "Are you really going to take Psalm 23 and plunge it off in that direction?" And I said, "Yes, I am." Because if we are all honest, if we're honest with ourselves, there is a little bit of the anti-psalm in all of us. The anti-psalm is what happens when our lives are self-centered and self-focused rather than God-centered and God-focused. And Psalm 23 gives us the remedy to the anti-psalm in our soul. And the remedy is remembering that God is our good shepherd. And so I want us to observe three things in this psalm – first, the focus of Psalm 23, and then the posture of Psalm 23, and then finally

the perspective of Psalm 23. The focus, the posture and the perspective, all woven around the theme that God is our good shepherd.

So the focus – the first point is almost too simple, you might say. The first thing to notice: where David's focus is. He begins with the Lord, Yahweh, God Almighty, the sovereign one of Israel. His eyes are on the Lord. It's not on – his eyes are not on his enemies, not on his horses and chariots, not on his friends, not on himself, not on other people. He is focused on God. Focus. Now, when I say focus, you might hear it like a coach yelling at his team, just focus. But it's not the kind of focus that comes by way of straining or striving. It's the kind of focus that comes by way of gazing, the way you would gaze at a beautiful picture. And so what's the picture that has David's attention here? He says it. He says, "The Lord is my shepherd." That's the picture that he's so focused on. And it's one of the reasons that we love Psalm 23, right? Because it's written in this personal and this intimate tone. Derek Kidner observes that the Lord is presented as many things in the psalm. He's a king, a deliverer, a warrior, a rock, a refuge, and all of those are reassuring things, but there's none quite like a shepherd. When you think of a shepherd, what do you think of? You think of the shepherd's closeness to the sheep, and we think of what a good shepherd does. What are his actions? What does a good shepherd do? Well, he rescues the sheep. He leads the sheep. He protects the sheep. He feeds the sheep. He cares for the sheep. Most of all, the good shepherd is present with the sheep. It's a beautiful picture of who God is for us as believers. Sinclair Ferguson points out that the picture of God as a shepherd, it's a familiar one in scripture. Of course, we find it in other psalms, but it goes all the way back to Genesis 48 when Jacob, at the end of the of his life, he says this: "God has been my shepherd all my life." And what is true for Jacob becomes true for the nation of Israel as well. In delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt and in their journey to the promised land, we see God as the good shepherd – rescuing, guiding, leading, feeding, protecting his flock. And so David is not just pulling this picture out of thin air. No, he's drawing on redemptive history and looking at his own history, weaving that into his own history. God is his good shepherd.

And we might be tempted to think, well, David, was he a young man, kind of naïve, in writing this psalm? But no, David wrote this psalm as an older man. So this is not a young, idealistic, naive David, but one who had gone through the peaks and valleys of life. And he found God to be the good shepherd. That's the summary statement of his life. And as David grew older, his focus seemed to become clearer. The Lord is my shepherd. And it's that reality that began to envelop every other reality in his life. That became the centerpiece. of his life. And so there's a good lesson for us, church of God, and that in our focus that God as our good shepherd would become the centerpiece of our life and we would gaze at who he is and his saving character. And so David was focused on God as his good shepherd.

Now, what would that look like in daily life if we're going to focus on God as our good shepherd? If that's going to be the anthem of our life, how does that find expression in our daily life? Well, we see it in the next point – the posture of this psalm. In verses 1 and 2: "The Lord is my shepherd." And then he makes this statement about himself and about his life. He says, "I shall not want." Some translations say, "I shall not be in want." Other versions say, "The Lord is my shepherd. I have all

that I need.” Well, that's quite a statement. We might say, really, David? You don't have any unmet desires? You're just completely content? But it's a statement not so much about his surface desires or his whims, but what he truly needs. And of course, there might be some physical connotations here with this verse, but primarily this is spiritual. David is saying with the Lord as my shepherd, nothing that is essential for my life is lacking. That's an amazing statement. What is essential for our lives when we boil it down? You could think about this spiritually. Peace, forgiveness, joy, strength, purpose – all of it is found in him. And David is content with God. We see this posture that David has of trust. It finds expression in three ways. Trusting one, in God's provision; two, in God's protection; and three, in God's guidance in his life. Provision. He says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." Now, when you think of green pastures, you might think of beauty. You know, rolling green hills, just lying down in the grass, gazing up at the sky on a clear day. We might think of the beauty of a green pasture. I think – we have a farm in Illinois, and I think of the beauty of the pastures there. I also think of the smell of the pasture sometime as well, and that's not so great. But there's many places you can go where it's just beautiful. But even more than that, the green pasture is a place of nourishment and sustenance. Green pastures are a place where the sheep can feed when they are hungry. And notice that it's not just that God will provide, but notice the character of the good shepherd here. He doesn't lead him into a place of scarcity and want, but he leads him into a place of plenty: *green* pastures. And the same is true for still waters. He doesn't lead him into a tumultuous place, but a place of tranquility and a place for the sheep to drink when they are thirsty. So, it's a picture of God's provision, but it's also a picture of God's protection as well. You know, there are borders and boundaries in pastures to protect the sheep from wolves and from other threats. Now, notice again, the good shepherd does not lead him into exposure or lead him into threat, but he leads him into safety. You may say, well, what in particular does David have in mind in this psalm? And it could be that David has God's word in his mind here. If you think about it, God's promises, they're the nutrients and sustenance for his soul. God's law provides the protective borders and boundaries, we might say wisdom for our lives, perhaps even God's people, the protection and provision that comes in being in God's flock. After all, there's strength in numbers.

And so, we might think about this in our own lives. There are no rolling green hills in the sanctuary here. There's no presence of still water, but there's God's people and God's word and God's presence with his people. The point is that David has found rest. He's found contentment in his life. How? How has he found contentment for his soul? By trusting in God's provision, by trusting in God's protection, and by trusting in God's guidance over his life. Now, why can he do that? Because he believes that God is a good shepherd. You see that further in verse 3: “He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” Well, we might ask, you know, where are the green pastures? Where do we find still waters? And the answer is along the paths of righteousness. David finds nourishment, safety, and rest in God's provision along these paths and God's guidance in these paths. Now, this would be juxtaposed with, maybe, a bad shepherd who would lead one on a wayward path. Now, my dad was not a bad shepherd, but at times he did lead our family on wayward paths. When I was a child, my dad was notorious for not wanting to get directions. And he always thought that he knew the way. He was really stubborn about this. I remember arguments

between my mom and my dad, just her imploring him, please pull over, ask someone. "No, I think I know where we're going." But we would always end up lost. And sometimes we'd even find ourselves in danger. I kid you not. I remember as a child being terrified as, one time, in downtown Atlanta, we were driving the wrong way down a one-way street, you know, in the back seat. But that was my dad when it came to directions. Well, God bless my father, but God's guidance and leading is not like that. David trusts that God is not going to lead him down a path where there is no safety. He trusts that God is not going to lead him down a path where there is no rest. He trusts that God is not going to lead him down a path where there are no green pastures and there are no still waters.

Now, what does David summarize? He finds restoration, and God's leading him down righteous paths. I saw the sermon meditation for this morning – or the scripture meditation, I'm sorry – from Psalm 25:9-10. I thought it's really appropriate. You can look in your bulletin. What does God do? He leads the humble in what is right. He teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep his covenant and testimony. And that was David's confidence, and that should be our confidence as well. So friends, if we have this focus on the Lord and we have this posture of trust, here's what it will do: it will change our perspective on our lives, even the valleys and even the battles that we face.

That brings us to our third point – the perspective of this psalm. And we might be thinking, okay, God the good shepherd, okay, but honestly, I'm looking at my life – I don't see green pastures. I don't see or I don't hear still waters. That's not my life. At least maybe not right now. Well, enter verse 4. We see a different perspective on the valleys and battles of life. And here we learn that the key to this perspective, as we're about to read it, it does not lie in thinking about what kind of circumstances we are in, but in the realization of what kind of shepherd we have – that's the key to the perspective that we see here. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Why? "For you are with me. And your rod and your staff, they comfort me." And so here we have the Bible in all its realism. We see not green pastures, not still waters, but the valley of the shadow of death. And it seems to contradict this rosy picture of life under the good shepherd. But notice that it's not the absence of the valley that comforts David. Rather, the presence and guidance of God in the valley. It's as though God pursues us and follows us into the valley. God following him in the valley as it were, the valley of the shadow of death. Now, it could be an allusion just to trials, difficulties, things that we face in life, or it could be an allusion to death itself. But even there – here's David's confidence – even there, God, the good shepherd does not abandon his sheep.

We see it in so many ways and so many times. I've done a good number of funerals here and seen God's presence with people as they walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And many times that's when God feels the most real. And so we see this confidence from David. God does not abandon him. He knows God will not abandon him. We see this. He says, "I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me." So you have a picture here of the good shepherd going into the valley, and he has rod and staff with him. Now the rod and staff are instruments of the shepherd to do two things. One – to ward off the enemy while he's in the valley, right? And then to goad the sheep in the right direction as they are walking through the valley. You

see the perspective there? The perspective as David is in the valley is that God is present with him as the good shepherd, protecting him, guiding him, leading him, even as he walks through the deepest valleys of his life. There is God, leading him onward through those shadows. So there are no circumstances – there are no circumstances, church of God – that we can find ourselves in where God is not following us as the good shepherd, and that's our confidence. And that's why David says he will have no fear. God is present with us, guiding us, defending us, helping us. Ours is simply to trust his presence and to trust his faithfulness and to trust his leadership as we are in the valley. Now, that's easier said than done. I know that. But as you're walking in the valley, you can look to him and ask the good shepherd to give you the grace, even, to trust his leading and his guidance and simply open your heart up to him. Lord, how are you leading me in this struggle? How are you leading me in this valley? What would you desire to speak to me, to say to me? And to trust that we ultimately will not be consumed by whatever it is we are having to providentially walk through. And that's David's confidence in the valley.

It's even more poignant in verse 5 in the battle. Verse 5, we see the picture shifts a bit from God as our good shepherd to God as our host. He says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows." And here we see this paradox here – the battle on the one hand and serenity of sitting down at a table on the other. We see David surrounded by enemies, yet sitting down at God's table, as his guest, that God has prepared. There is a now but not yet component here, I think. It's a picture of David's confidence in the midst of his trouble, but it's also a picture of where he is heading. Commentators note that in this context being a dinner guest is not so much you just come for an evening, but it carries with it this idea of coming to dwell. You have this subtle idea of permanence, even, here. You ever had a dinner guest who wouldn't leave? You get up, you start washing the dishes and doing all those little cues, you know? The evening is over. It's time to go. But think of a host that says, "Stay." Would you stay? Come, and be with me. This dinner, this feast, it's a picture of communion. It's a picture of salvation. He says, "You anoint my head with oil." And so here we see God, the host, receiving his guest, wiping away all the dirt and the smell of the battle with oil. He says, "And my cup overflows." You see the God, the good and gracious host, filling his cup. Isn't that great when you go over to someone's house and immediately they're greeting you with food, with appetizers, and they're already filling your cup up? You think how wonderful and how gracious they are as hosts. But here we see God, the host, pictured as such, filling his cup, and it's an allusion to the cup of blessing, the cup of mercy. It's not the cup of wrath, and it's not the half-empty cup of the anti-psalm. No, but it's the overflowing cup of God's salvation. So, we see the good shepherd who is also a gracious host, as many commentators have noted this pivot.

And all of this is about salvation. It's about communion. This imagery points to Christ himself as our good shepherd. You see, the only way for you to truly gain this perspective in your life, especially with the things that you are facing, the things that you're dealing with, the battles you're going through, the valleys you're having to walk through, is to get a picture of Christ as your good shepherd. That's the key to gaining that perspective. Christ, the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. Jesus, who drank the cup of wrath so that we can drink the cup of salvation, the

cup of blessing. Jesus, who walked through death so that we will not fear when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death or when we walk through death itself. And so what we have to do in those times when we go back to the psalm is remind ourselves of who God is and what he has done for us through Christ himself. Bring that reality into the valley with you. Mingle it in with your struggle and your grief and your trouble. Mingle the gospel in, because Jesus is our good shepherd. And because we know that he has done these things and that he is with us, we can have this settled confidence. We can look back in redemptive history, as David did, all the way back in Genesis and watch it unfold and spill over into his life. And as we see God working throughout redemptive history, filling up the cup of other people, watching it spill over into our lives, too. This same God, the same good shepherd, this same gospel for us.

And that changes our perspective about our lives, does it not? And we see that in verse 6. It's the culmination of this perspective. Here's what he says. He looks back over – looks over his life. All the things you can conclude when you look at your life and you look at the trouble. When you look at sin and all these other things, all the things that we can conclude what's going on in our lives – here's David's conclusion as an older man. “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” What a summary statement. What a confidence. But it's not a confidence in who he is. It's confidence in who God is for him. I would say this, friends: perhaps the fullest expression of the power of the gospel in our lives has to do with how we see our lives. It goes back to the psalm versus the anti-psalm.

Now I want to allow for this. There are people who are just optimists by nature. We all met them, friends with them. You know, people who just wake up in the morning, and their cup is just kind of full. You know, wake up in the morning, I tell you, good things are going to happen to me today. That's just their natural disposition. People like me, people love me, and they just kind of roll with that sort of optimism. And then there's some others by disposition who are given more to pessimism or more to doubt. I want to leave room for that difference in personalities and temperaments and all those things. But underneath that, the question is what is our perspective over our lives spiritually? What is it? Are we holding the half-empty cup of the anti-psalmist or are we holding the cup of salvation of the psalmist? Are we holding a cup – looking at our lives, are we one who sees disaster on the horizon or in the rearview mirror in hot pursuit? Something is behind me. It's always coming to get me. It's disaster that's looming in front of me. It's disaster that's looming behind me. That's one view. But the other view, the view of the one with the good shepherd, who trusts in the good shepherd, sees God's goodness and mercy. Listen: “following him.” And that word in Hebrew, it doesn't just mean you kind of look back and you see one of your children just kind of following you, just behind, and they're just sort of trailing you along. No, no. The imagery there is more aggressive than that. It's of one pursuing, one chasing you, tracking you down. And you know what David's perspective over his life was? That God's goodness and mercy is going to overtake me. That was his perspective, pursuing him, not trailing him, but overtaking him. And we might say, wonderful, you know, what a perspective to have.

And this last verse hearkens back to this eternal horizon that's over his life. Think about this, alright? This is how as we grow in the Lord, we want to grow in more and more confidence where we look ahead. We see the eternal horizon. You say, "Well, Derek, what about the things that are behind you?" And I look behind you. So, oh, there's God's goodness and mercy. It's behind me. So, God is before me as my good shepherd. And guess what? God is behind me as my good shepherd. I don't even have to look over my back. I don't have to watch my back. Why? Because my good shepherd is watching my back. And David says, as I look ahead, I have this eternal horizon. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. What a view. What a picture. What a posture. What a perspective.

So, how do we get that? How do we grow in that? How do we inhabit the world of the psalmist more fully? This world that David inhabits – life under the good shepherd. Well, maybe you're here this evening, and what you need is a focus shift. Maybe you're looking at yourself, maybe you're looking at others, maybe you're looking at enemies, maybe you're looking at your circumstances and all of those things. And really what you need to do is look away from those things and look to who your good shepherd is and to say, "the Lord" – here's my answer to life's trouble – "The Lord is my shepherd." And if you stare at that reality and make that your meditation and your gaze, it will orient how you should look at these other things. So maybe you need a focus shift, where you look more to God as your good shepherd. Maybe your posture needs to change. Maybe you need to grow in realizing that if the Lord is your shepherd, ultimately – listen, nothing that is essential for your life will be lacking. How do I know that? Because he is our good shepherd. And so part of that posture, that change in the posture, is to find rest for your soul by trusting his providence, trusting his protection, trusting his guidance, that ultimately God will give you what you truly need as he leads you on the paths of righteousness.

Maybe you need a fresh perspective. Perhaps your view of your life has been skewed and distorted by different things that you've gone through. And maybe you find yourself more in the anti-psalm than you want to be. What's the answer for the anti-psalm? It's the psalm itself. Maybe you see the valley. You see the battle, but you need to remember that you are not alone. You are not forsaken. You are not abandoned in the midst of the valley. No, your good shepherd, he accompanies you. He is present with his rod. He is present with his staff. He is faithful to lead you, to guide you through that valley to the other side.

And finally, he's there with oil. He's there to anoint your head with oil, to wash away all that might afflict us. And he's there with the cup of salvation, as the gracious host, greeting us with the cup of salvation, the cup of mercy, that cup that comes from the blood of Christ shed for us who is our good shepherd. And he invites us to sit at his table and to hope in him and to trust in him and to believe that ultimately, when we look back over our lives, it's the goodness and mercy that will overtake us. And so let's pray to that end.

Father in heaven, we do pray for this confidence and assurance. Lord Jesus, we look to you for it, knowing what you have done for us. And I pray that you would grow each one here, wherever we are, whether we're in the valley or in a battle or not. or whether we're confused about our lives, Lord, give us the clarity to

look and focus on you and your saving character and who you are, that our vision might clear. And we pray, Lord, that you would give us faithful hearts even as we see that you are faithful, that we would follow you along the righteous paths that you have called us to walk down. And we thank you and trust you for your leading and guidance in this manner. In Christ's name. Amen.