

*Colossians 3:16*

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,  
teaching and admonishing one another  
in all wisdom,  
singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,  
with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*



While on vacation this week I will be sharing some devotionals written by others. This devotional is by Pastor Sam Storms from Oklahoma City, OK. You can find more of his meditations at: <https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog>.

***THE GOOD SHEPHERD IN THE TIME OF COVID-19.***

What do we need most in times like these? If we have Jesus, nothing. At least that is what David would have us believe in Psalm 23.

Aside from John 3:16, Psalm 23 may well be the most famous and oft-quoted passage in all of Holy Scripture. I've seen it printed on greeting cards, embossed on plaques, written on T-shirts, sewn into quilts, and even parts of it have appeared on bumper stickers of cars! I attribute this to its remarkable and powerfully reassuring portrait of God as both the good shepherd who cares for and protects his sheep and the gracious host who provides for their every need.

God as the Good Shepherd who protects his flock is the focus of vv. 1-4.

We don't know when David wrote this psalm. Perhaps it was during his youth, as he sat under the shade of a tree on some Palestinian hillside, keeping watch over the sheep entrusted to his care. Or it may have been years later during his tenure as king over Israel, perhaps at a time when his enemies were mounting against him an especially powerful threat. Whenever and wherever it was, David wrote it as a word of reminder and encouragement not only to himself but to all of God's children.

There are countless descriptions of God in the Psalms: he is a King who rules over us, a rock of immovable stability, a deliverer in times of distress, a fortress in whom we find refuge, a shield behind whom we safely retreat. But there's something special about his being a shepherd. There's a dimension of personal tenderness and intimacy in the image of God as the one who shepherds his lambs. David well remembers the attentive watch and protective love he had for his sheep. "Yes," he may well have cried out in a moment of revelatory insight; "that's what God is to me and you!"

The Lord is my shepherd, declares David. He's more than simply "a" shepherd, as if one might say, "Well, yes, there are a lot of shepherds out there and the Lord, well, he's certainly one of them." No! Yahweh isn't simply one among many shepherds, nor even "the" shepherd. He's MY shepherd! If he be a shepherd to no one else or to everyone else, he is at least my shepherd. He cares for me, watches over me, provides for and protects me, all the while doing it for his name's sake.

What inference does David draw from this marvelous truth? The Lord is my shepherd, therefore I can do anything I want! No. The Lord is my shepherd, therefore I can wander off whenever I choose, disregarding his commandment that I stay close by his side! No.

The Lord is my shepherd, therefore I lack nothing! There is nothing I need, says David, that God has not or will not supply. I am altogether satisfied with God's management of my life. David isn't being insensitive to the pressing demands of life, as if it is unimportant whether or not we have money to pay our bills and adequate clothing and a roof over our heads. His point is simply that everything we have above and beyond God is a luxury. It reminds me of that story of the elderly Puritan who sat down to dinner to find one potato and a glass of water. He looked upon his "meal" and with profound gratitude declared: "All this, and Jesus Christ too!"

David's point is simply this: "Take everything from me except my God and I'll die the wealthiest man in the world" (cf. Psalm 16:2).

And what does he provide? "Green pastures" in which to lie down in safety (v. 2a), "still waters" from which to drink for refreshment, "paths of righteousness" down which I may walk with confidence (v. 3b), all of which is a source of restoration and renewal for my soul (v. 3a).

If that weren't enough, "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" I need fear nothing, for God is "with me" (v. 4a)! Some might prefer (and even presumptuously demand) that God insulate us from all evil and darkness and suffering. Some might even pray that he always take us "around" or "over" or "in the opposite direction" from all troubles and trials. But God's unfailing promise is that he will walk "with" us "through" the valley.

God doesn't simply send us into the valley with truths about him nor even angels to guard our steps. He pledges his personal presence "with" us. Wherever we go, whatever we suffer, he's there, with a "rod" to beat off ravenous wolves that seek to consume us spiritually (cf. 1 Sam. 17:33-37) and a "staff" to keep us under his control and bring us back to the fold should we stray too far.

But he's more than merely a good shepherd, he's also a gracious host (vv. 5-6), quick to "prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (v. 5a). In the ancient world, far more so than today, sharing a common meal with someone was spiritually significant. To be God's guest for dinner was more than a causal encounter. To eat and drink at someone's table forged a bond of loyalty and love, and often sealed a covenant between the parties involved. And all this "in the presence of my enemies"! Though they may continue to harass and threaten me, I'm breaking bread with the King of kings and Lord of lords!

To anoint someone with oil today would generally be regarded as little more than an inconvenient mess, but in David's world it was customary to anoint an invited guest as a sign of welcome and hospitality. It was the consummate expression of joy and acceptance!

What else can he say but that his "cup overflows" (v. 5b)! Joni Eareckson Tada put it best:

"When something overflows, we usually think of waste. Water that overflows a dam rushes out to sea. Gas that overflows a tank pollutes the ground. Coffee that overflows a cup stains the carpet. Milk that overflows a measuring cup drains down the sink. Most folk tend to equate 'overflow' with 'waste' or 'squandered resource.' But what about a life that overflows? What about a man or woman who brims over with the joy and grace and love of God? Is it all down the drain?" (Glorious Intruder, 59).

Far from it! We overflow with God's blessings as an expression of his lavish and unstinting affection for us. But there's more, notes Joni. "God doesn't intend your life to overflow down the storm drain or evaporate into the air. He wants it to soak others! The spillover of His love and goodness in our lives is to benefit and encourage those around us" (ibid.).

But for how long? Will God grow weary of his commitment to us, or might his supply of spiritual blessings dissipate and run dry? "Surely," says David, with absolute certainty and beyond all shadow of doubt, I declare to you that "goodness and mercy shall follow" you "all the days" of your life (v. 6a). All day, every day, whether they be days of despair and disappointment or days of celebration and joy; all day, every day, whether days of fasting or feasting, days of depression or deliverance, we will live in God's abiding presence, forever (v. 6b).