

**Text:** [Psalm 23 \(CEB\)](#)

**Date:** July 14, 2024

**Title:** "Protection, Provision, Presence"

**Theme:** The promises of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm are not for the dead, but the living.

## 1

I believe we've done the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm a real disservice  
And not only that, but I also believe we've short-changed  
generations of believers  
By taking a scripture full of promises for the living and making it all  
about dying  
By relegating it almost exclusively to funeral services

That's the overwhelming takeaway I have after spending time with  
the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm this week

The psalms traditionally have been associated with David  
Fully half are directly ascribed to him, including this one  
David, the king of Israel who grew up a shepherd  
Who could speak the language of sheep and shepherding  
Has something to offer us that's more than just comfort in the  
valley of the shadow of death  
But instead, hope for everyday living  
There's more to psalm 23 than funerals

## 2

I want to start by pointing to something you may not have noticed  
about this scripture  
What begins as an poem ABOUT God in verses 1-3  
"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
He lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful  
waters."

Becomes a conversation WITH God in verses 4-6  
“Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger  
because YOU are with me”

Which speaks to me about the fact that this scripture isn't meant  
just to be a testament to a life well lived  
What God did for the person in the casket  
But a testament to what God is doing right now, for us  
It's an invitation to tell our own stories

About God's protection, God's provision, and God's presence  
Protection – God looking out for us  
Provision – God making sure we've got enough  
And Presence – Christ showing up for us  
I want you to remember those three promises from this scripture

### 3

But before we go there, it may be good to talk about sheep and  
shepherds for a moment  
Here's why – none of us lives on a sheep farm  
So most of us know very little about them  
Beyond the fact that we love those Merino wool socks we got for  
Christmas

I think my main takeaway after taking a deep dive into articles  
about sheep & shepherds is this:  
The shepherd has got to be extraordinarily patient

Because it's hard to get sheep to do what you want them to do  
They're stubborn  
They scare easily  
And they tend to want to go their own way

Does that sound familiar?  
Stubborn, skittish, and prone to wander

I read one shepherd who said that a sheep can get out of a hole  
in a fence no bigger than its body  
But will sometimes refuse to go in a gate 10 feet wide

Does it surprise you then that “sheep” is the preferred biblical  
metaphor for humans?  
We like doing our own thing too

Not only that  
Sheep are also vulnerable creatures  
Not just to predators – the coyote, the wolf, the dingo

But also to surprising things that feel like they should be avoidable  
Like tipping over onto their backs when their fleece gets too heavy  
Or when they lie down to rest on uneven ground  
Sheep can be a bit like turtles in that way – requiring a patient and  
caring human shepherd to come and right them  
Because a sheep left that way for more than a few hours will die

The idea of things getting heavy enough that they tip us into a  
state we can't get out of ourselves –  
That sounds familiar too  
I feel like that's where we are more often than not

We suffer a setback with our health  
We go through difficulty in relationships with family and friends  
We get laid off

We have a hard time dealing with the things that stress us out  
Even if it's just the daily grind of getting up, going to work, and  
caring for ourselves and the people around us  
While being constantly worried about the state of the nation

And the world  
Sometimes just the day to day can feel like its just too heavy

#### 4

The beauty of this psalm is that it doesn't deny the reality of the  
darkest valleys  
It doesn't shy away from the pain of living

From the times we look up to find we've wandered off the path  
From all the times we feel like we don't have what we need

Or from the reality of the enemies who seek to do us harm  
So many of the psalms talk about enemies who taunt and oppress  
and pursue the faithful  
But here, it's completely flipped  
Here, David talks about the God who pursues us

And this is where maybe reading in an unfamiliar translation is  
helpful

Because we'd miss it if we were reading it in the King James  
Usually we hear verse 6 this way:

"Surely goodness and mercy will follow me"

But today we heard:

"Surely goodness and faithful love will PURSUE me all the days  
of my life"

The idea we are pursued by God's love is powerful  
And it's familiar to us as Methodists  
It's at the very core of our understanding of who God is

In a little while we'll baptize little Lainey  
We baptize babies as a sign and symbol of God's relentless  
pursuit of us throughout our lives  
Because we believe God is always reaching out for us

Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd  
Whose protection, provision, and presence we can trust  
Who never gives up, who never gives out, who never lets go

We don't run from the pain of living  
We don't hide when we find ourselves in the valley  
Because we know that all darkness is temporary  
And even in the shadows, there remain glimmers of God's grace  
that shine forth for us

Even in the presence of enemies, the table is set  
Our heads are anointed  
Our cups run over  
Goodness and love pursue us  
Somehow, miraculously, we lack nothing

## 5

The point of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm isn't just to celebrate the goodness of  
God into eternity  
The point is to celebrate and recognize God's work in the here  
and now

This scripture isn't just for the dead  
It's for the living, too

A continual reminder of God's protection, provision, and presence  
And even when I'm having a hard time seeing that protection or  
provision  
Because I'm scared and skittish  
Because I feel vulnerable  
Because I'm living out of my more sheep-ly nature

It's important to hear the reminder that I don't need to fear  
Because we have a Shepherd

Because I can say: "YOU are with me"  
YOU comfort and protect me

Of the three promises – I think it's presence that I most value  
The knowledge that I am never alone

Protection and provision can sometimes feel a bit uncertain –  
we can't always envision how things are going to turn out ok  
we can't see how we're going to have enough  
Just because we can't see the future

But what I've learned is that even when I am struggling to grasp  
God's provision and protection  
When I've fallen over and I'm looking at the sky and I wonder how  
in the world I'm going to get back on my feet

If I can trust for a moment in God's presence  
If I can realize that I'm not abandoned  
That I'm not alone  
Then I can say to myself, "I lack nothing"  
Then I can say to myself, "I fear no danger"

Every time in my life that's been difficult  
When I've felt totally defeated  
When I wanted to give up  
When I felt absolutely helpless and worthless and didn't know  
where to turn  
I can look back now and see how it was God, and God's people,  
who helped stand me back up

**6**

So this week, I want to ask you to do three things:

First, I want you to read this psalm  
I mean, not just once, but I want you to read it every day  
In a new translation each time  
Take note of what strikes you  
Maybe write some things down

Second, I want you to think back on a difficult time in your life  
One that you've come through already  
And ask yourself:  
Where did I see God's protection?  
Where did I see God's provision?  
Where did I see God's presence?  
Again, maybe write some things down  
The best way to increase our faith is remember all God's done in  
the past

Third, I want you to think about something that you're having  
difficulty with now  
A personal or family crisis you're trying to manage  
A difficult conversation that you're not sure how to navigate  
Someone you might consider your enemy who's been trying to  
tear you down

And again, ask the same questions:  
Where do I see God's protection?  
Where do I see God's provision?  
Where do I see God's presence?

Then, think back to that thing that God brought you through  
before  
Does it have anything to teach you about what you're dealing with  
now?

Jesus said: God isn't the God of the dead, but of the living  
(Matthew 22:32)

Likewise, Psalm 23 isn't just for the dead  
It's also for the living  
It's full of God's promises for every day

Say it with me:  
The Lord is my shepherd.  
I lack nothing.

Provision, protection, and presence.  
Promises of our living God, meant for daily living.

Amen.

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