

# OUR HEAVENLY SHEPHERD



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Comfort and Strength from Psalm 23

Ian Hamilton



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*Our Heavenly Shepherd*

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To my dear friends William and Margaret Dunlop,  
whose friendship over many years has been a  
constant encouragement to my wife and me.



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## Introduction

The book of Psalms comprises one hundred and fifty songs of worship compiled over approximately six hundred years. We do not know precisely when the final edition of the Psalms was compiled or who was responsible for the compilation. Over the past thirty years, studies in the nature, purpose, structure, and flow of the Psalms have become significant features of biblical studies.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this brief exposition and reflection on Psalm 23, however, does nothing to advance the scholarly insights that have so enriched the study of the Psalms in recent years. Rather, this exposition seeks to unpack the theological and pastoral riches so eloquently set forth in this psalm.

During my twenty years as a parish minister in Loudoun Church of Scotland, Newmilns, I presided over seven hundred funerals. During at least half of these we sang the Twenty-Third Psalm, always to the Scottish tune Crimond. The reason for choosing this psalm so often was that it simply and beautifully set forth the Christian hope. The Lord

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1. See O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2015).

God Almighty is the faithful heavenly Shepherd of His sheep, and He not only will faithfully lead His sheep in life but will accompany them as they walk through the valley of the shadow of death and will bring them into His house, where He will dwell with them forever.

The psalm is also a heart-searching challenge to unbelievers, especially religious unbelievers. King David's confidence as he faces the valley of the shadow of death and as he finds himself surrounded by enemies is not that he has been good and faithful (he hadn't been), or that he was a child of the covenant (which he was), but that the Lord Himself is with him: "You are with me." The true Christian's hope in life and in death is memorably expressed in the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A: That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

### **Best Known and Most Loved**

Psalm 23 is probably the best known and most read passage in the Bible. It is a wonderfully reassuring picture of the believer's life. One of the psalm's most impressive and notable

features is how often the personal, singular pronoun is used: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me... He leads me.” God cares for His people not in the “lump,” but individually and personally. It is true that the various pictures of the church in the New Testament are corporate pictures: the church is the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the temple of God, the family of God. We read in Ephesians 5:25 that Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. These vivid and evocative pictures of the church should not, however, detract from the personal commitment of God to individual believers. Paul could write that the Son of God “loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). The heavenly Shepherd watches over, leads, provides for, and protects His sheep with a personalized, individual care and compassion. As our Lord Jesus impressed on His disciples, “the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore” (Luke 12:7).

### **God the Shepherd**

The depiction of the Lord as David’s Shepherd is not unique to Psalm 23. The first reference to God as the Shepherd of His people is found in Genesis 49:24, where He is described as “the Mighty God of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel).” Later in Israel’s history, through His prophet Ezekiel, the Lord castigates the shepherds, the spiritual leaders, who had failed God’s people so dismally (see Ezek. 34). In the midst of His searing condemnation of these false-hearted shepherds, the Lord declares, “‘I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down,’ says the Lord GOD. ‘I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick;

but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment” (Ezek. 34:15–16).

The picture of God as the Shepherd of His people is rich in its imagery. Shepherds were absolute “monarchs” of their sheepfolds. They held unquestioned authority over their sheep. They were the providers and protectors of their sheep. They alone were responsible for leading their sheep to green pastures and still waters and for protecting them from wild animals and marauding bandits. When David offered himself to King Saul to fight Goliath, the Philistine giant who was publicly mocking God, he said, “Your servant used to keep his father’s sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God.’ Moreover David said, ‘The LORD, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine’” (1 Sam. 17:34–37). Shepherds were known to be fearless defenders of their sheep.

### **A Psalm of David**

It is surely not accidental that Psalm 23 is a psalm of David, the shepherd king. David knows what it is to be a shepherd. The psalm is his personal testimony to the Lord’s unfailing faithfulness to him in all the highs and lows of his life as a believer. He also knew what it was to be a wandering sheep,

to be an embattled sheep, and to be surrounded by enemies, even enemies within the Shepherd's sheepfold.

But to appreciate fully David's significance, we must understand that he is set before us in the pages of the Bible as a type of Christ. David is Israel's shepherd king, the servant king of Yahweh, the divine Shepherd of His people. In this office and role, David prefigured the Servant King of Yahweh, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is therefore a necessary twofold interpretation of the psalm that compels our attention. First, in Yahweh's care for David, His provision for all his needs, His guiding of him through life's darkest valley, His protection from surrounding enemies, and His bringing him ultimately into the joy and blessedness of His nearer presence, we see a prophetic outline of Yahweh's personal care and love for His Son—the perfect Shepherd King, the Lord Jesus Christ, the true Israel of God (Isa. 49:3). Second, the divine Shepherd who graciously and faithfully superintended King David's life is revealed in all His transcendent grace and sacrificial care in the life of God's incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus understood that He was “the good Shepherd” who had come to lay down His life for His sheep (see John 10:11–16).

### **A Psalm about Jesus Christ**

It is impossible for a Christian to read this psalm and not immediately think of Jesus's self-description as the Good Shepherd who had come to lay down His life for His sheep (John 10:11).<sup>2</sup> Jesus is the Good Shepherd who personally knows His sheep

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2. Jonathan Edwards has an excellent exposition of David as a type of Christ (“Types of the Messiah”) in his volume on typology. There Edwards details the historico-typological parallels from which he sets out David, his life,

(John 10:3). He goes before them and, unlike the “hireling,” He will not flee when He sees the marauding enemies of the sheep threaten to devour them (John 10:3, 12–13).

One of the Bible’s inherent features is its slow, deliberate, increasingly enriching unfolding of the history of redemption. The first gospel promise of Genesis 3:15, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel,” was both explicit and tantalizing. Who would this seed of the woman be? Throughout the Old Testament, the answer to that burning question is increasingly adumbrated. He would come from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10–12). He would be a greater prophet than Moses (Deut. 18:15–19). He would be a priest, not from the tribe of Levi but after the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110). He would be Immanuel, “God with us” (Isa. 7:14), and His name would be called “Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). He would be the perfectly faithful Shepherd Israel had never had (see Ezek. 34).

All these lines of trajectory find their convergence in the person of God’s only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, God’s final Word, the Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd who had come to tend God’s flock, see them brought safely into His sheepfold, and thereafter brought safely into God’s nearer presence.

When Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11), He knew what He was saying. He was identifying Himself as the long-promised Shepherd who would personally seek the

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offices, and experiences as typological preparations for the Messiah. See volume 11 of *The Works of Edwards* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993).

lost, bind up the broken, strengthen the sick, and destroy the fat and the strong.

Psalm 23 points beyond its immediate circumstance to the incarnate Lord of glory, who would do what no other shepherd could do: He would lay down His life as a sin-atoning sacrifice for His sheep, thereby securing their everlasting good.

### **A Psalm of Experiential Realism**

Psalm 23 might appear to confront us with a problem. Are we to assume that what we read here was David's daily, unvarying experience? From David's life and from the many psalms he penned, we know he experienced more than "green pastures" and "still waters." Indeed, the opening words of the previous psalm, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; and in the night season, and am not silent" (Ps. 22:1-2), eloquently speak of a time in David's life when green pastures and still waters were far from his experience. David's life as a man of faith was not even and untroubled.

We could say that Psalm 23 is but one snapshot of David's experience as a believer, and that would be true. But in penning this psalm, David not only speaks about the delights of green pastures and still waters but also writes about being led through the "valley of the shadow of death" (v. 4) and of being surrounded by "enemies" (v. 5).

Psalm 23 is neither idyllic nor unrealistic. David well understands that the life of faith is not an "even" life. The life of the perfect man of faith, the Good Shepherd Himself, Jesus

Christ, was not even and untroubled. He acknowledged that His disciples had stayed with Him in His trials (Luke 22:28). From the moment He entered into the public arena of His ministry and mission, hostility and opposition were His daily experience. The idea that the “normal Christian life” is a life of unsullied joy and peace, if only we exercise enough faith, is a blasphemy and a heresy.

No one has better understood this truth than the English Puritan pastor John Owen. In his exposition of the believer’s sanctification, Owen writes, just as “the growth of plants is not by a constant insensible progress...but...by sudden gusts and motions,” so “the growth of believers consists principally in some intense vigorous actings of grace on great occasions.”<sup>3</sup>

It has pleased the Lord not to give us steady, uninterrupted growth in grace; rather, He is pleased to have us cry to Him, wait on Him, and seek His face, often in the midst of trials, before He grants us to grow in likeness to the Savior—if nothing else, to humble us and keep us dependent on Him.

As an insightful pastor, Owen proceeds to answer a pressing pastoral question: “I do not see much, if any, growth in grace in my life: am I therefore devoid of the root of holiness?” Owen’s response is measured, searching, and pastorally reassuring. He says, first of all, “every one in whom is a principle of spiritual life, who is born of God, in whom the work of sanctification is begun, if it be not gradually carried on in him, if he thrive not in grace and holiness, if he go not from strength to strength, it is ordinarily from his own sinful

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3. John Owen, *Pneumatologia, or, A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit* (London: Banner of Truth, 1965), 3:397.

negligence.”<sup>4</sup> Owen urges us, then, to search our hearts if we appear to be regressing in holiness and to cast off the sin that so easily besets us. Second, Owen proceeds quickly to balance what he has just said: it is one thing for holiness to be present and another for the believer to be conscious of it. Indeed, continues Owen, “there may be seasons wherein sincere, humble believers may be obliged to believe the increase and growth of (holiness) in them when they perceive it not, so as to be sensible of it.”<sup>5</sup> Owen never forgets he is a pastor, writing for Christ’s lambs. He is quick to reassure struggling saints: “What shall we say, then? is there no sincere holiness where...decays are found? God forbid.”<sup>6</sup> Progress is erratic and “horticultural,” not even and “mechanical.”

This truth could be used by the sinfully negligent to placate their conscience: “The way of holiness is erratic and uneven. I must expect to regress and even grow cold in my affections; things will change for the better, sometime.” Such thinking reflects either a deeply backslidden condition or, more seriously, a yet unregenerate life. A true Christian will always grieve over his or her lack of progress in the grace and knowledge of the Savior, never simply shrug their shoulders with the thought, “Que sera, sera” (“What will be, will be”).

### **Living and Dying**

Throughout the Bible we discover that the life of faith in God experiences two synchronous realities: the believer is always being led in Christ’s triumphal procession (2 Cor. 2:14) and,

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4. Owen, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:400.

5. Owen, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:401.

6. Owen, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:404.

at the same time, afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, “always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:8–12). This “double grace” should not surprise us; it was the shape of the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the shape of the Christian’s union with Christ. It is this shape, first etched in the holy humanity of Christ, that the Holy Spirit comes to replicate in the lives of everyone whom He has united by faith to the Savior.

John Calvin used two vivid Latin words to express this synchronous reality lived out in the people of God: *mortificatio* and *vivificatio* (mortification and vivification). Calvin understands that sanctification, growth in grace, has two parts, both of which happen to us by our union with Christ.<sup>7</sup> These occur synchronously and continuously throughout the Christian life. In *mortificatio*, we seek, by the help of the Holy Spirit, to put remaining sin to death (Rom. 8:13). In *vivificatio*, we seek, again by the help of the Holy Spirit, to experience and express in our lives the risen, triumphant life of our Savior. This is the principal shape of the believing life.

### **A Psalm of Personal “Exodus”**

In Genesis 3 we read of Adam and Eve being exiled from the garden of Eden. Because they willfully disobeyed, God cast them out and set cherubim over the entrance to guard the way back to the Tree of Life. If humanity was ever to be restored to God, there would need to be “an exodus back to

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7. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.3.2, 9.

God, a deliverance out of exile.”<sup>8</sup> In the book of Exodus, we read of a second exile—Israel’s exodus, its deliverance by the hand of God from its slavery in Egypt. This moment of divine, sovereign power and mercy pervades the whole of the Old Testament and is highlighted in the New Testament by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:7: “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.” But even more momentous was the exodus accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Savior’s epochal meeting with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, Luke tells us that they “spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). The word *decease* literally means “exodus” (ἐξοδος, *exhodon*). In Jesus, God would effect an infinitely greater deliverance than He had under Moses.

The truths embedded in these great moments of exodus in redemptive history are reflected in every life that God makes His own. Every saved sinner has been “exodused,” rescued, from sin and death and hell and has been brought into the freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). In Psalm 23, David is writing as a rescued sinner who has been brought by the heavenly Shepherd into the security and freedom of His sheepfold.

If you have not been “exodused” from the guilt, tyranny, and condemnation of sin and have not been brought by God’s glorious grace in Christ into the security and blessedness of His family, your great need is to have your sad and tragic condition remedied. There is but one remedy, the Passover Lamb who was sacrificed to take away the sin of the world. He,

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8. L. Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 8.

God's own Son, Jesus Christ, says to you, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30).

John Owen wrote, "Unacquaintedness with our mercies, our privileges, is our sin as well as our trouble. We hearken not to the voice of the Spirit which is given unto us, 'that we may know the things that are freely bestowed on us of God.'"<sup>9</sup> My hope is that as we reflect on the psalm verse by verse, we will become better acquainted with our God-given mercies and see how rich and vastly blessed and privileged the believer's life is while also learning that the life of faith is lived out in the midst of dark valleys, surrounded by God's enemies. Above all, however, my hope is that we will see how personally committed the Lord is to care for, protect, and bring His people to be with Him in the glory of His heaven.

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9. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:32.

## Questions

1. Why did God include the book of Psalms in the Bible?
2. In what ways does Psalm 23 point us forward to the Lord Jesus Christ?
3. What is meant by *experiential religion*?
4. How would you define and describe what the Bible means by *sanctification*?
5. What does it mean in practice for the Lord to be your shepherd?