

52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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15. Psalm 23

In our march through the 52 major events in the Bible, today we're going to be looking at the second half of I Samuel and some of the incidences in David's life and then we're going to focus in on Psalm 23 and David's affirmation of faith in God as his shepherd. Let's pray: Father, we acknowledge joyfully and thankfully and faithfully that our assurance lies in you and that assurance is truly blessed. Father, we assert that we will not trust in horses and chariots, that we will trust in the name of our Lord. We thank you, Father, in a way that only faith allows us to thank you for the uncertainties of this age. We thank you that you will show yourself strong and that through these incidences that are about to start, apparently, that you will draw men and women, boys and girls to yourself and that you will help us to understand that the assurance that we have is an assurance that comes because you are our Shepherd. We pray, Father, that our assurance will, in fact, lie in you and in you alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I. Background for Psalm 23

After David's victory over Goliath, things continued okay for him at first. He developed a very close friendship with Saul's son named Jonathan, and in fact, Saul put David in charge of part of the army and the Lord blessed David. Whenever David went to battle, God made him victorious. The battle still belongs to the Lord. Yet, it's amazing in I Samuel 18 how quickly things start to fall apart for David. Saul becomes jealous of David's successes, repeatedly tries to kill him, and eventually David flees to the wilderness. He goes from wilderness to cave to wilderness in different places. And while he's out there men come to him, warriors come to him. They are described as people who were in distress, who were bitter and were in debt. Quite a group of people to associate themselves with David. But those are David's mighty men of valor. It was a difficult time for David. If you're not familiar with these stories I'd encourage you to read the second half of I Samuel. It was times of running from Saul, of hiding from Saul, of fighting, and of raiding, and all these kinds of things. And just when you think it can't possibly get any worse, we get to I Samuel Chapter 30. David and his men have been out fighting and they come back and they find that the Amalekites have torched their city and have taken captive all of their families. Just when you think it couldn't get any worse, it does. And David's men start to turn on him because they are so mad. They are contemplating killing him. And when you get to this part in I Samuel 30, you find yourself asking the question, "How is David going to respond this time?" I certainly think that there's something inside of at least me that if I were David I would have been tempted to respond, "You know, God, I fought Goliath, I fought the Philistines, I haven't killed Saul, I've been doing my best, and this is the thanks that I get for it? Phooey!" I would not be surprised if that would go through my mind if I were David. And yet I am not David.

David was a man after God's own heart and therefore, David responds even to this worse situation, not in fear, but he responds in faith. And as you read through the second half of I Samuel, what you will find is that David's faith is in fact woven through the fabric of the entire story. You see David time after time responding not in fear, but in faith. And his response in I Samuel 30, verse 6, is one of the greatest affirmations of faith in difficult times that I've ever seen. Verse 6, "And David was greatly distressed for the people, his soldiers, spoke of stoning him because all the people were bitter in

soul, each for his sons and daughters because they had been taken captive. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God." David knows that restoration of soul lies not in human things, but restoration lies with God. And so when times get difficult, it's to the Lord his God that he turns to be restored.

I like to use these stories and specifically I Samuel 30 as the backdrop to talk about Psalm 23. Psalm 23 is one of the best known and most loved Psalms in all of the Bible. And we're not sure when David wrote Psalm 23, but it's certainly through difficult situations such as we're reading in I Samuel 30 that taught David that the Lord was his Shepherd. "And because the Lord is my Shepherd", David says, "I will not want and I will not fear." In other words, I Samuel 30 is as good as any other place in the life of David to use as the backdrop for the theology of Psalm 23. Let me just say right up front: what is the central tenant, what is the central teaching in Psalm 23? Well, one of the clues that we have in Hebrew poetry is that they tend to put the most important thing right smack in the middle. And if you would see Psalm 23 laid out in Hebrew in rhythm and you counted from the top down and the bottom up, the very center of the Psalm is the middle part of verse 4. The central theme that David is trying to teach in Psalm 23 is: you are with me. Psalm 23 is about the very presence of God. It is about a man of faith, a man who is after God's own heart, who in the midst of the uncertainties of life, in the midst of the pains of life, when everything else seems to be moving and shaking, there's one thing that David knows about everything else, and that is that God is with him. That God is present with David in a personal way. "The Lord is my shepherd." And because David is so convinced that God is present in his life, out of that faith flows David's understanding that God will provide for him. And it is out of his faith in the presence of God that David understands that God will protect him. That's what Psalm 23 is all about: the very presence of God in the life of one of his sheep.

II. Image # 1: God as Shepherd

Let's look at Psalm 23 piece by piece. The first of the two images that David uses to make this point in perhaps the best known and that is the image of God as shepherd. So David begins in verse 1, "The Lord is my shepherd." What is striking about verse 1 is the intensely personal element that runs all the way through Psalm 23. As you read in the Old Testament, there was a good awareness of the corporate nature of the Jewish religion. There was an understanding that God was "our shepherd" for the nation as a whole.

But what is striking about Psalm 23 is how intensely personal it is, all you have to do is trace the pronouns all the way through the Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd. He makes me lie down, he leads me, he restores me, he leads me in paths of righteousness." And then when he gets to the middle part of the hymn and he's talking about the difficult things of life, he's get even more personal and he says, "You are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me." That's what's striking about Psalm 23, it is this intensely personal nature. Now, much of Israelite worship and much of Christianity is corporate, is it not? That there is a real sense in which God is "our God", and in fact, as you read through the Old Testament, you'll see God time and time again being called the Shepherd of Israel, that he was in fact shepherd over all the nation. And even in a passage like the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4, it is plural at first. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." There is a very real sense in which we a part of a group and

God is our God, God is our shepherd. And yet David understands that when the Shema continues, it continues in the singular. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." Even back in I Samuel 30, the author of I Samuel understands this about David. You see the pronoun that was used, it says, "But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God." David understands that there is more to true worship than the corporate aspect. As true and as important as that is, what sets David apart in just about all the Old Testament, is David understands the personal element in true religion. This is one of the hallmarks of David in the flow of revelation through the Old Testament. David understands that God is not only our shepherd, but God is my shepherd. In our western culture where everything tends to be personal, I don't think we can feel the jolt that would have happened if you were in 1000 B.C. and heard Psalm 23 and heard this intensely personal cry of faith that God is my shepherd.

But that's what David understands; it's what sets him apart in the Old Testament. It is out of this intensely personal faith that God is my shepherd that David is able to respond, "Therefore I shall not want. I shall not lack." This is the cry of faith that David believes that the Good Shepherd will do a good job at providing for him. In fact, Psalm 23 all the way through is a cry of faith after faith after faith, personal faith in his God. "The Lord is my Shepherd and because he is my Shepherd, then I shall not want, I shall not lack." Of course the question is not: lack what? And it's interesting that David later on in Psalm 84 answers this question where in Psalm 84:11 he says, "No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly." David understands that God determines what we need. God determines what is good for us. And God has committed himself to provide every good thing that you and I need. And David understands that the Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want, I shall not lack any good thing."

Then what David does in his Psalm is that he starts to enumerate and he gives us seven all together, but he starts to enumerate all the ways in which our Good Shepherd provides for his sheep. Let's just work our way through this Psalm and see the provision of the Lord that David is discussing. But as we go through, please notice that all these things have one thing in common. All seven of these provisions have one thing in common. They are a pure, unbridled, unrestrained statement of faith in a providing God. Every one of these is David's declaration of praise and faith to God that yes, you are my shepherd and therefore, I shall not want because I believe that you have, that you are, and that you will continue to provide for me. It's all faith, all the way through Psalm 23. And so he starts, "You make me lie down in green pastures." During the winter and the spring it wasn't that hard to find food for the sheep, but come summer and then into fall, it was difficult. So the shepherds would have to take the sheep out looking for pasture. And that's the image in David's mind of God his Shepherd going out looking for sustenance, looking for nourishment, looking not just for food, but for green pastures, for lush pastures. Second of all, this providing God, "He leads me beside still waters and therefore I shall not want." Again, it's this picture of the Shepherd not going behind the sheep and beating them with sticks, but it's the picture of the Shepherd going before his sheep, of leading them. And his sheep hear his voice, the sheep know his voice, and the sheep follow the Shepherd.

I didn't have time, actually I couldn't find the book, and I think I gave it away, but a man named Keller wrote a book called *The Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. It's a fascinating book on what it is to have sheep and it makes the Psalm come alive. Some of us may know something about sheep, I don't know much of anything other than that I was chased by one once, so I have all this baggage with sheep. I was just trying to take his picture. But as I understand it, sheep won't drink from moving water. Is that true? (space at end of tape). ...and as him not just taking them to water, but to still water, water that they can use to satisfy their thirst. It's a beautiful picture of God leading us and providing for us. Number three: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He restores my soul." Now, the way Hebrew poetry runs, the word should here stand for more than just the spiritual dimension of who we are. It's just another way of saying "me". And what David is saying is that because the Lord is my shepherd, he restores me, he revitalizes me, he strengthens me. As David's going to say in verse 4, he brings me comfort. Not only to the spiritual part of my being, but to the physical part of my being, to all that I am. And when you read this you get a sense that David's Shepherd is saying, "Slow down. Catch your breath. I am going to provide you with green pasture. I am going to provide you with still water. I am going to restore you, your soul and your body." And this certainly is what's going on in I Samuel 30, isn't it? When David, in the heat of the moment, when his men are thinking about stoning him, he turns to the Lord to be built up, to be restored, to be strengthened and comforted.

We have the same pattern in Jesus, don't we? We have the same pattern where he goes out and it happens over and over in the Gospels. He goes out and has a really busy day healing a lot of people, casting a lot of demons, doing a lot of teaching. Makes preaching double services seem inconsequential. Of course, I like to point out to people he died when he was 33. I'm not sure I want to follow that. But what did Jesus do after a hard day of ministry? He comes home, he puts his feet up on the sofa, he pops open a bag of pretzels, he flips on the TV and vegges out for two hours, right? You're supposed to stop me! What does Jesus do? Jesus goes out in the wilderness, he gets off by himself, he gets away from the crowds and he gets away from the busyness. He gets away from ministry and he goes off and he spends hour after hour after hour praying to his Father, praying to his Lord. Jesus understand the same thing that David understands that it is God who restores my soul. It's been kind of a convicting week for me and I've looked at my life and I've said, "Where do I go when I need to have my soul restored?" But David continues with the fourth way in which God provides. David says, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want because he leads me in paths of righteousness." Just as the shepherd takes the sheep on the right path towards the right destination, so also God leads us along the right path towards the right destination, towards the destination that is truly good. You have to see in the flow of the Psalm how all this is going, of David's faith in a God who provides food and nourishment and restoration and guidance for him. He leads me in the right paths, taking me in the right direction. But why? It's one of the interesting questions of Psalm 23. Why does God do this for David? Because David is a great person? No, he does it for ultimately one reason, and one reason only. "He leads in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." The ultimate reason why God leads David in paths of righteousness is not just to help David, but ultimately, at the deepest level, God does what he does for his own sake, for his name's sake. God does what he does so that at the end of the day, he gets the glory, he gets the honor, he gets the praise that it is his name that is glorified. It is an intensely God-centered picture of reality, is it not? You know, I think the human tendency is to go

through life thinking that I am the center of the universe and that absolutely everything revolves around me. And therefore, when I pray to God my shepherd and I ask for this and I ask for that, he's doing it because I am the center of everything. I'm the most important. Everything's about me, right? No, it's not about me. At its deepest most fundamental level, it is about God and it is about his name and his reputation and his glory and his honor, and his praise. That's what David understands. He understands that all things are to be done to the glory of God. All things are done for his glory. That's why our mission statement ends the way it does. "All to the glory of God." And just as we are about God's glory in what we say and what we do, so also God is about his own glory in everything that he says and he does. This is one of the great unifying, perhaps, the unifying theme that runs through the entire Bible. There are passages all over the place that we can look at, but just for a couple: Psalm 25 verse 11. It's another Psalm that David wrote and he's thanking God that God has forgiven his sins. In Psalm 25:11, David writes, "For Your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt for it is great." David wants his sin forgiven, make no mistake about that. There's a personal element in that he wants his sin forgiven, but that he understands that's not ultimately what motivates God. What ultimately motivates God is that it will be done for his name's sake, for God's name's sake, so that when people see God forgiving sinners, then our praise and our glory and our honor and our adoration doesn't go to the sinner. It doesn't go to the preacher who talked about the sin. But rather, the praise and the honor and the glory go to God. It is for his name's sake, his reputation. Psalm 31, verse 3, David writes, "For you are my rock and my fortress and for your name's sake you lead and guide me." This notion is all the way through the Bible. And that David understands that God is the center of the universe, that all things revolve around him and ultimately everything that we say and we do, that we think and that we act, that we believe and that we teach and that we preach and we say, all of these things, all of them, are to bring praise and glory and honor ultimately to him and to him alone. And David understands that. "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." David is not the center of the universe and neither am I, and neither are you, thankfully. In verse 4, then, David moves on to a slightly different topic. He moves from faith in God's provision to faith in God's protection. And he says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." An especially appropriate verse to look at on the eve of war. Hebrew is a very picturesque language. If it wants to say, "God got mad" it says, "God's face grew red". If you want to say that someone is patient, Hebrew says, "His nose is long." It's a very picturesque, weird language in some ways. I say that so you'll understand that I'm not completely off the wall when it talks about death. It's most likely a Hebrew way of expressing the deepest darkest place. And certainly that includes death, but watch the flow through the Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, he's doing all these things, he's leading me in paths of righteousness." And even if the Shepherd is going to lead his sheep through an extremely dark place where predators would live, where there is the possibility of the sheep being attacked and killed, even if the Shepherd is leading them through this really dark, dangerous place, David says, "I will fear no evil." Please hear this. The presence of danger, even the danger of death, does not mean that we're on the wrong path. It is so easy to think in these kinds of situations, whether it's physical harm or mental harm, or national or just difficult situations, it is easy, is it not, when we find ourselves in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death, in the dark places in life, it's easy to think that God doesn't care anymore. It's easy to think that God has somehow lost control. It's easy to think in these difficult situations, "Well, I guess it's all up to me

now, isn't it?" It was Benjamin Franklin, not the Bible that said, "God helps those who help themselves." And it's the voice of fear and it's the voice of lack of faith that looks in the valley of the shadow of death and responds in fear. But it is especially in the midst of pain, it's especially in the midst of the dangers of life, that faith, not fear, but faith, says God is still my Shepherd and he is still taking me to a better place. He is still leading me in paths of righteousness and if that takes me in the valley of the shadow of death, I'm not going to throw my faith out the window and say, "Somehow God no longer cares." That's the flow of the thought in this Psalm.

I was reading one of the commentaries and he asked the question, "Why sometimes does God lead us through the valley of the shadow of death?" And the answer is: to take us to a better place. And our response of faith must be while we are on the journey to still believe that God is God and knows what he is doing.

We then move to the center part of the Psalm in the second half of verse 4. David is about to tell us what all this has been about and David is going to tell us why he believes so intensely that God will protect him. Again, notice the shift in pronouns from "he" to "you". From a personal to the really personal. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Why? "For you are with me." That's the central affirmation that David wants to make in Psalm 23, that David enjoys the very presence of God in his life. And it is out of his faithful conviction that God is always with him, even in the valleys, that David is able to respond in faith that this God will also provide and that this God will also protect.

Now David goes on, he says, "Your rod and your staff they comfort me." The rod is the shorter, heavier instrument used for fighting animals off. The staff is the longer, more slender shepherd's staff that would be for guidance or for just prodding a little. David's thankful for those. David's thankful that God has a club to beat his enemies over the head with. David is thankful that God has a staff to give direction and guidance to the sheep. But that is not the center of the Psalm. The center of the Psalm and that which gives David the greatest assurance is that he knows by faith beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is with him. This is the intensely personal nature of Psalm 23. He has talked about the same thing in an earlier Psalm in Psalm 16. And in Psalm 16, verse 11, David says this to God, "You make known to me the path of life for in your presence there is fullness of joy, at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." This is a man of faith, a man who is after God's own heart, who understands that more than anything else, at the very core of his faith, at the very core of his religion, at the very core of his relationship with God is a God who is present with him, and in his presence there is fullness of joy. That's the heart of Psalm 23 and that's the heart of King David, the very presence of God. And it is because of that faith that everything else flows.

III. Image # 2: God as Host

Well, if that weren't enough, then David continues in verse 5, and he's shifting to a different image of God. This time he is shifting to the image of God as a generous banquet host. As we look at these final three provisions of God, they all are saying the same basic thing. They're all saying that God is abundant in his provision. God is excessive in his provision. God is lavish in his provision for us. David says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." God does not provide David

with a burger from the local store, as good as that might be. He provides us with banquets, lavish and exuberant times. He anoints our head with oil, a sign of hospitality, a sign of rejoicing. David's cup overflows. God is filling up his cup, it is pouring over the edge and God is still pouring himself into David's cup. It's a picture of excess and abundance and lavishness. And David knows beyond a shadow of a doubt what Jesus will say a thousand years later, "I came that you might have life and that you might barely get through life scrimping." No, Jesus said, "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly." It is God's kind of good. God determines the good that he will not withhold for us. God determines the kind of abundance we're going to have. But his abundance is excessive, it is lavish, it is beyond anything that we can even think or hope or ask for (Ephesians 3). God is abundant, excessive, wasteful in his abundant provision for you and for me. Why? Because he is my Shepherd, because he is with me. And it is out of that relationship that his provision and his protection flow. And David gets to verse 6, the conclusion, the final affirmation of faith in verse 6 and he says, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." David knows that instead of being pursued in the darkness by predators, that he will be pursued in all situations by God's goodness and by God's mercy. You know the Hebrew word behind mercy. It is "hesed". When David says goodness and mercy, it is God's goodness; it is God's mercy. But it's not his goodness and mercy that he sheds abroad to all people. These are covenantal terms and God has bound himself to David as his covenantal God and David has agreed to be part of God's covenantal people, so it is within the context of that relationship that David knows that it is God's goodness, that it is God's covenantal faithfulness, his mercy and love toward his own that will follow him all the days of his life. Verse 6, in fact, all of Psalm 23 does not apply to everyone. It applies only to Jesus' sheep.

IV. Conclusion

So there you have the three main affirmations of Psalm 23: the first thing he says, the middle thing he says, and the last thing he says. "The Lord is my Shepherd, you are with me, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." What was central in David's relationship with God was not corporate religion. It was knowing that he had an intensely personal relationship with the God of the burning bush, and the God of the Exodus, and the God who gave them their Promised Land. And it is out of that affirmation of the faith of the presence, the personal presence of God that David is able to say, "I shall not want. I will fear no evil. And I will dwell in house of the Lord forever." A cry of faith as beautiful as they come in all of the Bible.

A thousand years after King David lived and died, his Shepherd was born. The Shepherd's name was Jesus and when Jesus grew older and started his ministry, he picked up the same imagery as he was trying to help people understand who he was. In John Chapter 10, Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd and he says, (I'm going to change some of the pronouns to make it personal), John 10, starting at verse 3, "My sheep hear my voice and I call my own sheep by name and lead them out. And when I have brought out all my own, I go before them. And my sheep follow me, for they know my voice." Later on in verse 10, the Good Shepherd says, "I came that my sheep may have life and have it abundantly. I am the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." And a few years after Jesus said those words, he did lay down his life, did he not, for his sheep? He laid his life down at the foot of the cross

where he paid the price for the sin that his sheep had committed. The news of the gospel is that someday our Good Shepherd is coming back for us, isn't he? Someday either at our death, or when God the Father says, "Enough is enough" and he brings an end to time and our Shepherd comes back for us, then we'll be able to say with David in Psalm 23, "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

In Revelation 7, the last book of the Bible, it talks about the end of time. John the Apostle who is writing it picks up the same imagery. He's talking about Jesus' sheep that were killed because they were persecuted. And he says in Revelation 7, starting at verse 15, "Therefore, they (the sheep) are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more neither thirst anymore, the sun shall not strike them or any scorching heat for the Lamb (Jesus) in the midst of the throne will be their Shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." He who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. Neat picture, isn't it?

The question of Psalm 23 is really quite simple. The question of Psalm 23 is: are you one of his sheep? Is your neighbor one of his sheep? Are your coworkers, are your fellow students one of his sheep? Because the promises of Psalm 23 are not for everybody. The promises of presence and provision and protection are only for his sheep, are they not? And his sheep, Jesus' sheep, know they need a Shepherd. Or as I often say it, they know that they're sinners, that they've been separated from God and they know that there's nothing they can do about their sin. Jesus' sheep believe that their Shepherd laid down his life for them. We believe that Jesus' death on the cross paid the penalty for our sins. And Jesus' sheep hear his voice. And Jesus' sheep follow him. They commit their lives to him. If you are not one of his sheep, then I invite you this morning to pray the ABC's. To admit that you're a sinner, to believe that his death on the cross paid God's penalty for your sin, and to commit your life to him, to become one of his sheep and to joyfully and gladly follow our Shepherd. If you are one of his sheep, then Psalm 23 has a challenge for you, does it not? It is a challenge for you to live out your faith, to understand at the very core of who we are, that we are people with whom God's presence dwells. And it is out of that intimate and personal relationship with the God of the universe that should flow forth our faith in his provision, and our faith in his protection. That is the challenge to become his sheep and then to live as his sheep. I'd like to do something in closing that is a little unusual. I'd like all of us go through and say Psalm 23 together. And then I want to break it down into three pieces and I want to talk about God's provision and give you a time out loud to thank God for his provision in your life. Then we'll move to a time of thanking God for his protection, and then finally we'll move to a time of thanking God for his very presence. For God has not called us to religion and to religious rituals, but to an intimate and a personal and an abiding relationship as a vine on the branch that God is present in our very lives. Let's stand. And if you're not really familiar with this particular translation of Psalm 23, I'm reading it out of the pew Bibles. Let's read it together. "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 will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Let us pray: Father, we thank you for your provision, your physical provision, your personal provision, all the things that you give us. Hear now the cries and the bleating's of your sheep thanking you for your provision.

Father, hear the cries of thanksgiving from your sheep for the protection, spiritual and physical that you afford each one of us even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Father hear the cries of your sheep as we thank you for your very presence in our hearts and in our lives.

Oh Father, you are our Shepherd and there is nothing in heaven or on earth that we desire more than you. Amen