

## Psalm 23: Introduction, Verses 1-2

### Introductory Comments

1. Why do we love this psalm so much? Why do we reach for it in times of personal distress, reciting it at funerals and memorial services? No doubt it is a beautiful literary creation, but the Bible is full of beautiful writings, and none of them capture our hearts like Psalm 23. In just a few lines, it conveys the distilled wisdom of generations, offering us a way of seeing the world that renders it less frightening, teaching us to deal with the loss of people we love and even with conflict with those who don't like us or treat us badly. It shows us how to recognize the presence of God at times and in places where we might think God was absent or at least might be inclined to overlook God's presence. It has the power to teach us to think differently and, as a result, to act differently.  
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2. In a mere 57 words in Hebrew (and about twice that many in English), the author of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm gives us an entire theology – a more practical theology than we can find in many books. He teaches us to look at the world and see it as God would have us see it. If we are anxious, the psalm gives us courage to overcome our fears. If we are grieving, it offers comfort to help find our way through the valley of the shadow. If our lives are embittered by onerous people, it teaches us how to deal with them. If we are obsessed with what we lack, the psalm teaches us gratitude for what we have. And most of all, if we feel alone and adrift in a friendless world, it reassures us that “Thou art with me.”
3. **Who wrote Psalm 23?** Like many books of the Bible, we will likely never know. Tradition ascribes it to David (as it does all 150 of the psalms). But this is highly unlikely, as there is a virtually unanimous consensus amongst scholars that David could not possibly have written all the psalms (especially since many of them were written during the Babylonian Exile, which happened hundreds of years after David's death). Also, some idiom present in the psalms were not in use until long after David's time. It may be that King David composed a few psalms – and perhaps even Psalm 23 as it contains imagery that would have been familiar to a shepherd/warrior/king. But it may also be that “a psalm of David” meant “a psalm in the style of David” or “a psalm composed in honor of King David” or even “a psalm composed by the house of King David.”

Questions, then recite Psalm 23:1-2

### Questions for Discussion

1. **What does it mean to say, “The Lord is my shepherd”?** *It is to say that we live in an unpredictable, often terrifying world, ever mindful of all the bad things that might happen to us and to those around us. But despite it all, we can get up every morning that world because we know that there is Someone in that world who cares about us and tries to keep us safe.*

2. **What does God “caring for us like a shepherd” look like?** *One way to understand this is to look at what is commonly called the “Shepherd’s Creed” articulated by Jacob to Laban in Gen 31:38-40: “These twenty years I spent in your service, your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock. That which was torn by beasts I never brought to you. I myself made good the loss, whether snatched by day or snatched by night. Heat afflicted me by day and cold by night; sleep fled from my eyes.” As these verses indicate, the shepherd was expected to do his best to fend off predators by day, but all bets were off by night. The implication is that, while a shepherd cares for each of the flock, there is no way a shepherd can prevent all calamity. More insight comes through the book of Numbers, which is basically a listing of the members of each tribe of Israel during the time of wandering. While scholars consider the numbers unreliable, there is a greater significance to the counting of these pages. Like a shepherd, God lovingly counts every last one of the flock and grieves for each one that is missing. And lastly, in one of the greatest artistic creations ever fashioned, the Pieta by Michelangelo shows Mary the mother of Jesus holding the broken body of her son on her lap, looking at him with such tenderness and sorrow. While this specific image may not be historical, it still moves us deeply by its truth. This may be because the woman in the sculpture holding the broken body of Jesus is not Mary but God, the mother creator who created life in all its fragile vulnerability and who grieves for all God’s children when they suffer. God’s shepherd-like love for all humanity is conveyed by each of these three examples. What other examples can you think of?*
  
3. **What does it mean to say “I shall not want”?** *We often think of what we “want” as something we “desire.” But in the King James translation, “to want” means not “to desire” but “to lack,” or “to be without something.” The promise of this line is that God, our faithful shepherd, will see to it that each member of the flock has enough food and water and a warm, safe place to sleep. The ancient rabbis saw this verse as having been inspired by the experience of the Israelites wandering in the desert, when God provided for their needs for 40 years – food, water, even keeping their clothes from wearing out, so that they lacked for nothing. I like how one rabbi interprets this verse: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall often want. I shall yearn, I shall long, I shall aspire. I shall continue to miss the people and the abilities that are taken from my life as loved ones die and skills diminish. I shall probe the empty spaces in my life like a tongue probing a missing tooth. But I will never feel deprived or diminished if I don’t get what I yearn for, because I know how blessed I am by what I have.*
  
4. **What does “laying down in green pastures” connote?** *It is an expression of thanksgiving for the lushness that is available and which provides connection to nourishment and nature. He is grateful for the opportunity to lie down, to stop striving. He understands that if he had to be on the go all day long, as his ancestors had to be when they were slaves in Egypt, he would wear out. He is grateful that his resting place is green and fertile, rather than dry and harsh. These are among the ways in which God adds to our sense of security, providing us with refuge from a noisy, intrusive world – an alternative to the way we spend so many of our hours.*

5. **Why are “still waters” important?** *The still waters represent a calmer, more manageable, life-giving source of water (as opposed to the chaotic, unpredictable ways that water often acts in oceans, rivers, and storms). The still water is able to quench our thirst without threatening us. In Hebrew “still waters” is “mei menuhot,” which literally means “waters of rest and relaxation.” In his popular book, “A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23”, Philip Keller writes that sheep are incapable of finding good water on their own. They will drink stagnant, unhealthy water if left to their own devices. Also, sheep will not drink from water that is moving. They will die of thirst before doing so.*

*\*\*\*For next session, read Psalm 23:3-4*