

Please read this and pray for your church family. Join us, if you can, in reading this with your family and praying at 10:15 on Sunday, March 29, 2020.

The Lord, our Shepherd and Host

Dear First Southern Baptist Church Family,

I hope this morning finds you well. I hope you are keeping the faith with a sincere heart in these difficult times. Know that I have been praying for you all, and many have shared with me that they are praying for our body as well. Last week we saw how the gods, or idols, of the nations were utterly powerless; however, the God of Israel is all-knowing and all-powerful. The gods of the nations needed saved and to be carried to safety by the people that worshipped them, yet the God of Israel does not need to be rescued by his followers. He is the one that carries them. In this sense we focused mostly on God's ability to save and sustain his people through trouble. This week we will look less at God's ability to save and sustain and more so at his character in doing so. It is important for us to see that a mighty, omniscient God is not merely at a distance barking orders, but that he is intimately, graciously close to us. To that end, I'd like us to look at perhaps the best-known psalm, Psalm 23.

The psalm reads, in the English Standard Version:

- 1) "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- 2) He makes me lie down in green pastures.
 He leads me beside still waters.
- 3) He restores my soul.
 He leads me in paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
- 4) 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.
- 5) You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.
- 6) Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

At the outset, it is important for us to remember that when reading the Psalms, we aren't typically dealing with language that is meant to be read literally. The psalmists employ poetry to express and draw out strong emotion and to that end they often speak in figurative, hyperbolic language. Bible scholar Dr. Robert Plummer, who currently teaches at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has said in his excellent book **40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible**, "When reading poetry, we do not find scientific, factual lists. We expect to be presented with a moving reality and to be moved ourselves. Of course, that is not to deny that the poem's author intends to convey factual information. However, we must expect figurative (nonliteral) and exaggerated language, which if taken literally, would be wrongly understood." So, when we're looking at Psalm 23, we want to understand what the poetic imagery is meant by the author to convey about God. What we see in these six verses, which are jam-packed with moving, descriptive images, is that God is primarily described and shown to be our Good Shepherd and our Good Host.

This is evident right from the beginning of verse 1. God is our shepherd. From the start of the psalm, notice that the psalmist says God is *my* shepherd. There is a personal, direct relationship between the psalmist and God. He's not far off. God is the one overseeing his care. We'll see in the proceeding verses what that looks like, but let us not miss the intimacy of the word "my." In this verse, the implication is that because God is our shepherd, we shall not want. The second phrase describes God as our provider. Simply put, because God is our shepherd, the one leading, guiding, and providing for us, I shall not lack that which I need. Now, we know that we all go through times of need. The psalmist is not saying that God's people never have needs, but he is saying that God, their shepherd, is the one who cares for and supplies his people in their need.

In verse 2-4, the psalmist specifically expands the imagery of God as a shepherd and his pastoral care for his sheep. In the psalmist's day in Israel the sheep would have to be moved from place to place throughout the summer and fall to find sufficient food; however, in the winter and spring months, the sheep could be led to and remain secure and provided for in verdant, sprawling green pastures. Places where they could rest and be satisfied for the whole season. The image speaks to the abundance and security found in the provision and care of the Shepherd. The still waters also speak of abundance and security without rush or worry. All of verse 2 describes the abundant and refreshing care of the Lord for his people.

In verse 3, we read that "He restores my soul." In this we learn that the loving care of the Shepherd refreshes and satisfies us so sufficiently, that it is nourishing to the very core of our being. Our souls are refreshed and restored in the Shepherd's good care, by his good provision, and in his nearness to us. Not only does he provide and care for us, but he also guides us in the right way to go. It is not that the path he leads us on makes us righteous, as much as it is the righteous or right path to walk. He will not lead us along the crooked or wicked path. He is trustworthy and not only will he provide for us, but we can trust the direction in which he leads us. God leads his people this way for his name's sake. His own good name is up for scrutiny if he were to do anything less. We can trust that because his name is nothing short of good, holy, and glorious, that his leading is also good, holy, and glorious.

In verse 4, we see the extent of his shepherding. He provides for us and guides us even in the darkest valleys, even in our hardest days, even through death itself. Notice that even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, even in that desperate place, he is there with us. He is not far off. God provides and leads even there, which causes the psalmist to conclude that he has to fear nothing, nor any type of evil that may come. God's presence is his true comfort in calamity. The Lord's nearness is his true hope in evil circumstances. God is the true light in the darkest night of the psalmist's journey. He is comforted by God's rod and staff, which would both be used to guide the sheep, but also to defend them from predators and thieves. So, not only does God's shepherding mean that he provides for us and guides us, but it also means that he protects us, especially in our greatest need. Notice too, that in verse 4 the psalmist shifts from speaking in the third person about God, to speaking in the second person. Not "he is like" or "he does," but "you are" and "you do." I can't help but wonder that maybe in thinking about God and composing the song to encourage others he shifts to the addressing God directly, worshipping even as he writes. The psalmist has experienced this loving provision, guiding, and protective care and begins to praise the one he's writing of.

In verse 5, the metaphor shifts from describing God as our good Shepherd, to describing him as our good Host. God is the one who prepares the banquet table, even in the midst of our enemies. Imagine being invited in to the King's table, eating the King's lavish food. Now imagine that the one pursuing you to harm and destroy you enters the hall. What enemy dares to defy the King? You can eat, rest, and be refreshed even while the enemy waits in the doorway because the King is the one who secures your safety. The enemy has no ultimate power or authority here. Not only that, but the text says that God anoints the psalmist's head. In the psalmist's day, it was an honor for the esteemed host to anoint distinguished guests with oil before the meal. Consider what an extravagant act of love and kindness for the King of kings to anoint, honor, and welcome unworthy wretches like us to his table! Even so, the imagery doesn't end here. The psalmist also describes his cup as overflowing. The good Host is providing lavishly, abundantly, and overwhelmingly for the satisfaction of the guests at his table.

All of this profound, excessive, and unimaginable provision, guidance, and protection evoked by both the image of God as our shepherd and our host leads to the grand conclusion of verse 6. Notice the word "surely" at the beginning of the verse. It speaks of the psalmist's confidence that no matter what might befall him, goodness and mercy would follow him all the days of his life. There's an eternity in his hope. The word translated "mercy" in the ESV is the Hebrew word "hesed" which is often used throughout the Old Testament to describe the covenantal love of God had sworn to his people. It is this oath, the very promises of God, that cause the psalmist to rest secure. The house of the Lord, his gracious host, would be his dwelling place all his days and forevermore. Assuming King David as the author of the psalm, 19th century Presbyterian William S. Plumer wrote of this verse:

"David's persuasion was that goodness and mercy should follow him. His enemies had followed him, perhaps were now following him, and might follow him again with relentless enmity; but these things did not move him, while he knew that goodness and mercy should

follow him. The ground of this agreeable persuasion was the promise of God, his experience of the love and care of his Shepherd, and the condescension and bountifulness of Him, who had spread the feast and made the son of Jesse a welcome, though undeserving guest.”

The promises of God, his covenantal love, that cause the psalmist to rest secured are not merely promises made, but promises kept. Consider that the loving, shepherding care of God described in the psalm is echoed by Jesus’ words in John 10:11-15, (really the whole chapter!) in which he says that he is the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd doesn’t merely promise to provide for, guide, and protect his sheep. He lays down his life to provide for, guide, and protect his sheep. In Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection we have the abundance of God’s good provision, giving grace, redemption, and atonement for sin to his sheep, securing for them the true hope of his enduring goodness, mercy, and love. Because Jesus died and rose again, all those who repent of their sin and put their faith in him can say confidently with the psalmist that “surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” It’s no wonder we see these themes expressed in song in Psalm 23. The thought of God’s loving-kindness which provides for our needs and secures our eternal hope is overwhelming. It led John Newton to write in the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” that “The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures; he will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.” Not only is God strong enough to save, but he is also kind enough to save. Not only does he know our circumstances, he is compassionate to us in them. Not only does he promise to provide, guide, and secure his people, he extravagantly and abundantly satisfies their truest longings. He is our Good Shepherd and that should comfort us in this time of need.

As we thought about last week, here are a couple of practical thoughts about how this text applies to us and our current circumstances. I hope you will prayerfully consider how this text prompts you to pray, repent, and boldly trust in Jesus.

- 1) It is easy to panic and be moved to fear in these days. We were already living in an anxious age, but the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed our cultural fear and anxiety into epic proportions. This text is like a father’s comforting arm around a child’s shoulder. It’s a reminder to us that God will care for us, even now. He is the one who provides, we don’t have to be anxious about the economy. He is the one who guides, we don’t have to worry about the capability or motives of our leaders. If you find stress, fear, and anxiety rising up in your heart and mind, let this text remind you of who your good Shepherd is. Prayerfully confess your worries to God, and ask him to help you rest, even though you are anxious or afraid, in the comfort and security of his goodness.
- 2) Let this text encourage you that even if you feel isolated, lonely, or stir-crazy, God is near. The impossible profundity of that statement is often lost on me. God, the Holy One, the Creator of all things, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, is a friend to a lowly sinner like me. He’s accessible. Hebrews 4:14-16 says that we can boldly approach the throne of grace with confidence and know that we will find mercy, grace, and help specifically because we have a sympathetic, compassionate high

- priest in Jesus. Ask him to remind you of his presence. Let us be moved by this text to worship our mighty God.
- 3) Let us know that whether things get better or worse from here, our hope is secure because we trust in Jesus. Psalm 20:7 says that “some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.” Psalm 23 reminds us that in abundance or want, in life or death, in health or disease, in brightest day or darkest night, God is the one who holds us fast. Paul said in Philippians 4:11-13 that the secret to enduring any circumstances is that we can do all through Christ who strengthens us.
 - 4) Let us follow the example of our Good Shepherd and not grow weary of caring for one another. It’s hard to function as a church while social distancing, but do not lose sight of the fact that God has placed us in this faith family at First Southern for our good, the good of other members, and His glory. Check in with each other. Make some phone calls, send some texts or emails. Constantly lift one another up in prayer. Give to provide for one another as you are able. In caring for one another we uniquely display the gospel to each other and show the world we are disciples of Jesus by our love.
 - 5) Finally, as we are loving each other, don’t fail to see the unique opportunities you have to display the love of God and share the gospel of Jesus with your neighbors. Seek out opportunities to serve and care for those who might not know Jesus. Recognize that there are many, many people around you that do not possess the sure hope that you do in Christ. There are many fearful, hurting, and needy souls all around you. How might you uniquely bear witness to good news of Jesus in this strange season that wouldn’t have even been possible a month ago? Pray that God would use this calamity to move your neighbor, your coworker, your wayward family member, your friend, or the stranger you meet (from a safe six-foot distance!) to see and believe in Jesus Christ.

Please know that I love you and have been praying for you. I have been trying to make phone calls and keep in touch. I apologize if I haven’t spoken to you directly yet. Our family is enduring this well so far, but we are also enduring it and this past week we endured it with a stomach bug. I hope to catch you all in the near future. In the meantime, feel free to call me, especially if you have a need or concern. I long to be able to gather together with you face to face, to shake your hand and hug your neck, to hear you sing the songs of faith, to bow our heads in prayer together, and to study the Word with you. Until that day, may the Lord bless you and keep you.

Sincerely,

Pastor Bryan McClelland
First Southern Baptist Church, Williamsport, PA