



DAVID GIBSON

THE
LORD
OF
PSALM 23

JESUS OUR
SHEPHERD,
COMPANION,
AND HOST

FOREWORD BY SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

“There is no passage of Scripture I have turned to as frequently or as desperately as Psalm 23. It has blessed, guided, and strengthened me in my hardest seasons and darkest days. Yet I have not come close to mastering its content or exhausting its riches—something that became clear as I read this lovely, helpful, challenging, easy-to-read guide to one of the Bible’s brightest treasures. I give it my highest recommendation.”

Tim Challies, author, *Seasons of Sorrow*

“To read this book is to sit under the best pastoral care—that of a pastor who expounds God’s word clearly, lovingly, and with delight. The word shines here, as we take time to follow the whole shape of Psalm 23; ultimately, the Savior of the Scriptures shines, Jesus the good shepherd, who is with us all the way home.”

Kathleen Nielson, author; speaker

“*The Lord of Psalm 23* combines an attentive reading of the text with rich theological insight, all brought together to nourish and comfort the heart. I warmly encourage you to read it and meet the Lord afresh. This book was a tonic for my own soul at a time when I was feeling overwhelmed.”

Tim Chester, Senior Faculty Member, Crosslands Training

“Reading Psalm 23 through the lens of union with Christ—the good shepherd incarnate—*The Lord of Psalm 23* brings assurance, comfort, and guidance to those of us who ask, ‘Can the Lord prepare a table in the wilderness?’ This is a wonderful encouragement.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“A pastor’s heart breathes through this book. Just as the psalm’s own words are heartwarming and beautiful, so on the lips of a caring pastor these meditations warm the heart and delight the soul. They did me good. They will do you good.”

Christopher Ash, Writer in Residence, Tyndale House, Cambridge; author, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*

“There are two ways of reading and studying Scripture. One is like clipping down a motorway, traversing big chunks, getting the sweep of the story. The other is like milking a cow—you just sit there with one text and keep pulling and squeezing. The latter is what David Gibson does with Psalm 23—he ‘milks’ it marvelously, and your cup will run over!”

Dale Ralph Davis, former Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

“The Psalter is the hymnbook of the Bible. God’s people were instructed to come into his presence with singing and into his courts with praise (Ps. 100:2, 4). As they lifted up their hearts in song, they gave voice to their laments and tears as well. No psalm is likely more beloved and consequently more abused than the twenty-third. In this short book, David Gibson unpacks the beauty and depth behind these almost too familiar words so we can hear and sing them anew.”

Harold Senkbeil, Executive Director Emeritus, DOXOLOGY:
The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel

“An old text has become a new friend. After reading *The Lord of Psalm 23*, I have fallen in love with this psalm all over again. David Gibson draws out its blessings with profound and soul-stirring richness. As you read this little volume, the beauty of the good shepherd will shine with even greater brightness in your mind’s eye. What a great shepherd, companion, and host we have in Jesus; and this book brings that truth to full light. Read it, meditate on it, and pray over it. Doing so is time well spent, because it is time spent taking in the glories of Christ.”

Jason Helopoulos, Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church,
East Lansing, Michigan

“*The Lord of Psalm 23* is a superbly well-titled and rare gem of pastoral theology. David Gibson demonstrates great skill in shining fresh light on the familiar verses, with delightful felicity of expression, fueled by penetrating, insightful reflection. Widely researched, with detailed attention to the text, and rooted in practical application, the book fills our vision with the shepherd Lord himself and brings us to worship him in renewed amazement and appreciation of his covenant grace and mercy. Reading this sensitive and warmhearted pastoral exposition has been a refreshing spiritual tonic to my soul.”

David Jackman, Former President, The Proclamation Trust

“Just when you thought you knew all there was to know of Psalm 23, along comes David Gibson’s deep and pastoral dive into this beautiful psalm. Your mind will be sharpened and your heart warmed as the author walks you through each verse with precision and a pastor’s eye. And with every step, he points us to Jesus, the true good shepherd, who came to lead us home. I loved it!”

Jenny Salt, Associate to Archdeacon of Women’s Ministry, Sydney Anglican Diocese; Host, *Salt—Conversations with Jenny*

“The beauty of David Gibson’s journey through the Twenty-Third Psalm is its sustained focus on God. When the Lord is your shepherd, you have everything you need. His wisdom will lead you. His rest will restore you. His presence is with you. His strength will protect you. And his goodness and mercy will follow you all the way home. Read this book, and your soul will be nourished with a fresh view of all that is yours in Christ.”

Colin Smith, President, Open the Bible; Pastor Emeritus,
The Orchard, Arlington Heights, Illinois

The Lord of Psalm 23

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The Lord of Psalm 23

Jesus Our Shepherd, Companion, and Host

David Gibson

Foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Lord of Psalm 23: Jesus Our Shepherd, Companion, and Host

© 2023, 2026 by David Gibson

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2023

Reprinted with study questions 2026

Printed in China

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Hardcover ISBN: 979-8-8749-0591-0

ePub ISBN: 979-8-8749-0593-4

PDF ISBN: 979-8-8749-0592-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gibson, David, 1975– author. | Ferguson, Sinclair B., writer of foreword.

Title: The Lord of Psalm 23 : Jesus our Shepherd, companion, and host / David Gibson ; foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson.

Other titles: Lord of Psalm twenty three

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022058467 (print) | LCCN 2022058468 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433587986 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781433587993 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433588013 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Psalms, XXIII—Commentaries.

Classification: LCC BS1450 23rd .G48 2023 (print) | LCC BS1450 23rd (ebook) | DDC 223/.207—dc23/eng/20230321

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022058467>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022058468>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

RRD	36	35	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	
13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

For Drew Tulloch

*In Him I have an offering, an altar, a temple, a priest,
a sun, a shield, a Savior, a Shepherd, a hiding place,
a resting place, food, medicine, riches, honor, wisdom,
righteousness, holiness, in short, everything.*

JOHN NEWTON

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Foreword

OCCASIONALLY IN THE CHAPEL SERVICES at the seminary where I taught, one of the students would introduce the guest preacher with the four magical words, “He is my minister.” There are few descriptions under-shepherds of Christ’s flock value more than these simple words expressing the special bond of affection that exists between pastor and people. I have never had the opportunity to use these words—that is, until now. For David Gibson is not only my friend; he is my minister. By the time you have finished reading these pages, you will realize why I count it a great privilege to sit under his ministry.

The Lord of Psalm 23 takes us through the six verses of what—at least where I come from—is by far the best-known and most frequently sung psalm in the Bible. In the days when hymnbooks were standard issue in churches, in many places—not least, funeral chapels—the books almost opened themselves at Psalm 23. I have known that psalm almost since I learned to talk, or at least since a well-meaning aunt gave me a child’s storybook version of it as a present. Its words (especially sung to the tune “Crimond”) have been the soundtrack of my life. It is not entirely my aunt’s

fault, however, that I have not always appreciated it. Where her kind gift misled me was the way its front cover pictured David, the psalmist. There he sits beside a rock, a young teenager with glowing complexion, handsome face, spotless clothes, and an untarnished shepherd's crook. This David was exactly the kind of boy I was not and never would be. Familiarity with this image did not so much breed contempt as cloud my mind to what generations of believers had found life-sustaining and soul-nourishing in this great psalm.

I suspect others share my experience. I cannot now recall exactly when all this changed; but I know what caused the change and opened my eyes to the obvious truth that lies on the surface of the text. What was needed was to experience some degree of what David describes in verse 4 as deep darkness, "the valley of the shadow of death." Then the ghost of my childhood image of the psalmist would be exorcised. Then it would become clear that this psalm is not the product of an untried shepherd boy musing on how God is like him but the testimony of someone who bears the scars of trials, failures, loss, and—yes—the sins of his youth that led him two psalms later to ask God not to remember them (Ps. 25:7). This David had been in the valley of deep darkness; he had tasted the supplies of God even when—indeed, especially when—surrounded by his enemies. It was then he had learned what his forefather Jacob meant when he spoke of the Lord as "the God who has been my shepherd all my life long" (Gen. 48:15).

Probably you are holding this book in your hands because you wonder (as I did) *why* this psalm has meant so much to so many Christians or because it has meant so much to you personally, and you are eager to discover more of its riches. In either case,

FOREWORD

you are putting your hands—and more importantly your mind and heart—into the safe hands of David Gibson. His ministry combines the quality of intellect and insight that makes him an outstanding expositor of Scripture (more able than he himself realizes) with the heart and devotion of a pastor who loves the church he serves. Here, in *The Lord of Psalm 23*, he shares with all of us the food that has first nourished his own flock. And if I say that the content of this book is typical of the quality of his ministry (not just an unusual “spike” in it), I hope this will reassure you of the integrity and reliability of what he writes here. I feel sure that, like many others who have told me how much they have valued David Gibson’s other books, you will want to read more from him in the future. But, first, you are about to appreciate and enjoy this one!

Sinclair B. Ferguson

A Note on Singing the Twenty-Third Psalm

PSALM 23 IS A SUPERLATIVE SONG of confident trust in God. Its words of praise radiate with delight in the Lord as they cause us to worship him for who he is and what he does. The poetic beauty of its heartfelt adoration means, of course, that there are as many different versions of the Twenty-Third Psalm in hymns and songs as there are interpretations of it in commentaries, sermons, and other theological tomes.

This book originated in a series of three sermons preached to the Trinity Church family in Aberdeen, and in our worship services we followed each sermon by singing a different version of the psalm. These are included at the ends of the three parts of this book.

The first hymn, written by Christopher Idle in 1977, is “The Lord My Shepherd Rules My Life.” Idle wrote it, he said, “to provide a version of the twenty-third Psalm in familiar meter which would avoid the archaism and inversions of the established sixteenth-century version of the Scottish Psalter.”¹ He sought

¹ Christopher M. Idle, quoted in the text information for “The LORD, My Shepherd, Rules My Life,” accessed August 20, 2025, <https://hymnary.org>.

to capture the biblical view of a shepherd, whose role is to rule rather than coddle and cosset his sheep. His choice of tune, “Brother James’ Air,” was composed by James Leith Macbeth Bain (ca. 1840–1925), who was born in Perthshire, Scotland. Bain was a healer, mystic, and poet known to his friends as Brother James. The tune is twelve bars long and so requires the last two lines of each verse to be repeated.

Next is a hymn from the 1650 Scottish Psalter, “The Lord’s My Shepherd, I’ll Not Want.” This is probably the best known of all metrical versions of the Psalms. The text was written by the English Puritan William Whittingham (1524–1579), a translator of the Geneva Bible who married John Calvin’s sister and succeeded John Knox as pastor of the English-speaking congregation in Geneva. Whittingham was dean of Durham from 1563 until his death. The hymn is in common meter, and so, many tunes fit its text. In recent years, however, the tune “Crimond” has become the favorite, with “Wiltshire” a close second. “Crimond” was composed by Jessie Seymour Irvine, whose father was at one time minister in the village of Crimond in Aberdeenshire. Queen Elizabeth heard the tune at Crathie Church, where the royal family worships when staying at Balmoral Castle. She chose it for her wedding in Westminster Abbey in 1947, and it was sung there again at her state funeral in 2022 as the second Elizabethan age drew to a close.

The third version included here is my favorite, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is.” This paraphrase was penned by Henry Williams Baker (1821–1877), a vicar in the Anglican Church. He was editor in chief of the iconic hymnbook *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, for which he wrote a number of texts. John Bacchus Dykes was music editor for the hymnary, and he wrote the

beautiful tune “*Dominus regit me*” specifically (the opening phrase of the psalm in Latin). The Irish tune “St Columba” is found in some hymnals and suits the text very well. The hymn has six verses corresponding to the six verses of the psalm. There is New Testament imagery: the “ransom” is from Matthew 20:28 and the “living water” from John 4:10, and the fourth verse says, “Your cross before to guide me.” There are other rich allusions to the Lord Jesus in this hymn, which we will come to later in the book.

The choice of these songs over others does nothing to denigrate the many alternative renderings of Psalm 23 set to music and verse. Rather, these are presented here simply to aid your worship as you read this book and to add yet more layers—an idea you will encounter a lot in this exposition—to the treasures contained in the psalm.

The combination of words of address in sermon and words of response in song and prayer is part of the powerful rhythm of corporate worship. It enables us to perceive the same reality from different angles and to engage the reality of who God is with all our being. May the words of these hymns and the words of this book combine to move your heart, soul, mind, and strength to love Christ more.

The theologian and the hymn writer traverse day by day the same country, the Kingdom of our Lord. They walk the same paths; they see the same objects; but in their methods of observation and their reports of what they see they differ. So far as theology is a science the theologian deals simply with the topography of the country; he explores, he measures, he expounds. So far as hymn writing is an art the writer deals not

with the topography but with the landscape: he sees, he feels, and he sings. The difference in method is made inevitable by the variance of temperament of the two men, the diversity of gifts. But both methods are as valuable as inevitable. Neither man is sufficient in himself either as an observer or a reporter. It is the topography and the landscape together that make the country what it is. It is didactics and poetry together that can approach the reality of the spiritual kingdom.²

2 Louis F. Benson, *The Hymnody of the Christian Church* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1956), 25.

The Twenty-Third Psalm

A PSALM OF DAVID

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.¹

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness²

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death,³

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

1 Hebrew *beside waters of rest*.

2 Or *in right paths*.

3 Or *the valley of deep darkness*.

THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely⁴ goodness and mercy⁵ shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell⁶ in the house of the LORD
forever.⁷

4 Or *Only*.

5 Or *steadfast love*.

6 Or *shall return to dwell*.

7 Hebrew *for length of days*.

Introduction

SOME TEXTS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE are hard to preach on or write about, not because they are especially difficult for the pastor or theologian to understand but because they are already so profoundly precious to the hearer and reader.

I suspect this is more true of Psalm 23 than of any other part of the Bible.

I came to preach on this psalm to my own church family after visiting a dear friend in the congregation who was hospitalized for major, life-changing surgery. After his operation, for several weeks my friend was able to read only very small portions of text. One day he showed me his copy of W. Phillip Keller's book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Keller reads the individual phrases of the psalm through his shepherd eyes and runs each word through his shepherd hands; the result is a thoughtful and intimate reading of Psalm 23.¹ We discussed the book and why it was helpful, and as I walked home that day, the idea for three sermons on Psalm 23 came to me. I did some reading and initial study, outlined the sermon series in a way

1 W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970).

that seemed to make sense, and even sourced a picture of a deep, dark valley to advertise the sermon series to our congregation. It was sure to whet their appetite! I proudly showed my artwork to my friend next time I visited the hospital.

“No,” he said, almost immediately. “That hillside in your picture is so soft and gentle you could do forward rolls all the way down! In my mind ‘the valley of the shadow of death’ looks and feels like the valley in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.”

We will come to that valley later in this book and to John Bunyan’s vivid depiction of it. Bunyan certainly helped me understand it much better, and I hope I can do it justice here. But my friend revealed something that might happen as you read these pages. Psalm 23 has comforted so many of us during the most painful and difficult moments of our lives that to have someone else analyze it line by line and tell you what it means, when you have already felt what it means in such a precious way, can be a profoundly disappointing experience. If you’ve actually lived in the valley, you don’t need me trying to describe it to you. That feels like taking something beautifully well-worn and exquisitely comfortable out of your hands, playing around with it, knocking it out of shape, and handing it back to you now beyond recognition.

I hope and pray your experience will not be like this. My aim is for this exposition to be like revisiting an old friend, with the familiarity and ease of such an encounter offering a gateway to learning new and unexpected things that detract in no way from what the two of you already have but, rather, serve only to add new layers of depth.

The riches in this psalm are inexhaustible. We will see that even the small phrases in it are, to use Martin Luther’s lovely phrase, “a

little Bible.”² These six short verses are a window into the sixty-six books of Scripture, and they take us through the whole story of redemption in an elevated, majestic, and also personal, intimate way. In the pages that follow, I simply want to walk through each phrase of the psalm and, as best I can, portray the beauty of its meaning for us. The walk will not be linear, like a straight line tracing the tightly composed argument of an epistle. Rather, this journey will be more circuitous and involve revisiting some parts of the psalm in light of its other parts and, indeed, other portions of the Bible.

On the one hand, “this Psalm is so clear, that there is no real need to comment upon it”;³ on the other hand, it contains numerous words and ideas that are “open ended” and regularly “under defined.”⁴ I trust that in what you read here you won’t lose track of that first truth about the clarity of Psalm 23, and that your experience of the Lord Jesus as shepherd will only become richer and sweeter. That goal can also be realized because of the second truth about the “open ended” nature of the psalm. This reality is not to be feared. You will see that the English Standard Version, which I am working with in this book, and which is printed in full at the start, contains no less than seven footnotes on issues of translation, and we will engage with many matters like this. So, simply by reading this version of the psalm, we are already embarking on a path of finding more treasures in this psalm than meet the eye on a first reading. This combination of truths about

2 Cited in William S. Plumer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 7.

3 David Firth, *Hear, O Lord: A Spirituality of the Psalms* (Calver, UK: Cliff College Publishing, 2005), 36, cited in Richard S. Briggs, *The Lord Is My Shepherd: Psalm 23 for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 65.

4 Briggs, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, 66, 99.

Psalm 23 is part of why the psalm is universally loved and also why we will not quickly plumb all the depths it contains.

I am going to lead us through Psalm 23 with the help of Alec Motyer's incisive outline, which is tucked away, almost obscurely, in *The New Bible Commentary*. Out of gratitude for his outstanding work as a commentator, I have retrieved Motyer's profile of the psalm, and it has guided my reading here in three vignettes: the sheep and the shepherd (vv. 1–3), the traveler and the companion (v. 4), and the guest and the host (vv. 5–6). As part of this, Motyer observes that each of these sections has a personal confession at its heart—"I shall not want" (v. 1), "I shall not fear" (v. 4), and "I shall dwell" (v. 6)—with the reason for these three confident assertions beautifully explained in each section.⁵

If these portions of the psalm make up its skeletal structure, then the spine of the psalm is the close, deeply personal relationship between its author and the person it describes. This is expressed as a "he-me" relationship in the opening lines, which is close enough but then most beautifully and seamlessly becomes "you-me" in the valley of the shadow of death. As Motyer says, "The darker the shadow, the closer the Lord!"⁶ From that point on, the psalm only ever directly addresses the Lord as good shepherd, closest companion, and generous host.

This means that this psalm is in our Bibles as an exquisite depiction of the Lord Jesus Christ. More than that, it is a song of personal praise flowing from what it means to know and adore

5 Alec Motyer, *New Bible Commentary* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 500. So too Susan Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries: A Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1–72*, vol. 2 (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 145.

6 Motyer, *New Bible Commentary*, 500.

him as belonging to *me*, personally. So in these pages, in faltering words, I have one simple aim: to show you in the images, poetic beauty, and themes of Psalm 23 just how the Lord Jesus takes complete and absolute responsibility for those who are in his care.

I believe this is the point of the shepherding imagery, which blends into the hosting imagery. In the ancient Near East, shepherds were entirely and absolutely responsible for their sheep, and hosts were entirely and absolutely responsible for their guests.⁷ This is why the words of this psalm have nourished God's people ever since they were written down. From start to end, the language describing God is active, intensive, causative—he *makes*, he *leads*, he *restores*, he *leads* again, he is *with* me, he *prepares*, he *anoints*. Through the doorway of only six short verses, we enter a world of the most stunning beauty because of whom we meet once inside the psalm and because of what he does for us as we walk through life with him. Psalm 23 teaches that if we belong to Christ, we are in a world of active initiative, of strength, of leadership and protection; it is a relationship of the very best and most secure intentional care.⁸

Throughout church history many of our best-loved theologians and pastors have seen that what Jesus offers us is so comprehensive precisely because what he gives us is himself. He gives us everything we need because he himself is everything we need. The scale of his sufficiency has drawn forth some of the most beautiful lines we have in Christian theology. Consider, for example, John Calvin's depiction of all that Jesus is for us, both in his person and in the work he accomplishes:

7 I owe this point to my brother Jonathan Gibson in "Comfort for All of Life," a sermon on Ps. 23 preached at Cambridge Presbyterian Church, February 28, 2016, <https://www.cambridgepres.org.uk/>.

8 Gibson, "Comfort for All of Life."

We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ. . . . If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth. . . . If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross; if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same; if inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his Kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given to him to judge. In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other.⁹

Calvin's words reach these eloquent heights because of his profound grasp of the doctrine of union with Christ—all that is Christ's becomes ours through our faith-union with him.

Although the grammar of Psalm 23 is different from this, I want to show you that the theological worldview of Psalm 23 is not. Indeed, it is in the imagery of the psalm (sheep with a shepherd, traveler with a companion, guest with a host) that we see the tangible, pictorial resonances of union with our Savior. Your being united to Christ is not a doctrine floating somewhere out there in the abstract theological ether, nor is it confined to the pages of dusty systematic theologies. Rather, it is the very essence of what it means to be a Christian and

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.16.19.

INTRODUCTION

to have the Lord Jesus as *your* shepherd. You belong to him—completely, absolutely—and because of who he is, you have everything you need.

My simple prayer for this book, in the words of William Gadsby’s hymn of praise to the Lord Jesus, is that through its pages your “soul could love and praise him more.”

Immortal honours rest on Jesus’ head,
my God, my portion and my living bread;
in him I live, upon him cast my care;
he saves from death, destruction and despair.

He is my refuge in each deep distress,
the Lord my strength and glorious righteousness;
through floods and flames he leads me safely on
and daily makes his sovereign goodness known.

My every need he richly will supply,
nor will his mercy ever let me die;
in him there dwells a treasure all divine
and matchless grace has made that treasure mine.

O that my soul could love and praise him more,
his beauties trace, his majesty adore,
live near his heart, rest in his love each day,
hear his dear voice and all his will obey.¹⁰

¹⁰ Words by William Gadsby © in this version Praise Trust / www.praise.org.uk. Used by permission.

PART 1

THE SHEEP AND
THE SHEPHERD

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.

PSALM 23:1-3

CHARLES SPURGEON CALLED Psalm 23 “the pearl of the Psalms.”¹

We all know why.

Those who know and love the Lord Jesus find that this psalm’s “soft and pure radiance delights every eye. . . . Its piety and its poetry are equal, its sweetness and its spirituality are unsurpassed.”² In different versions of the Bible, through varied versions in songs and hymns, the words of Psalm 23 are embedded in the collective consciousness of the Christian church the world over. Athanasius said, “Most of Scripture speaks *to* us; the Psalms speak *for* us.”³ If the psalms are precious, speaking the language of the heart’s personal experience of God, Psalm 23 is the pearl because it combines a beautiful picture of who God is with a beautiful picture of what God does, and it does so all the while simply assuming that this marriage of divine person and heavenly benefits is the personal experience of every believer: “The LORD is *my* shepherd” (v. 1).

In part 1 of this book we will consider the first three verses of Psalm 23. We are going to see three beautiful things about our shepherd: who he is, what he provides, and where he leads.

- 1 Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 1:351.
- 2 Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 1:351.
- 3 Athanasius, *Letter to Marcellinus*, paraphrased in John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 1, *Psalms 1–41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 23 (emphasis added).

Who He Is

MANY READERS, COMMENTATORS, and preachers move so quickly to the main imagery of Psalm 23—sheep and shepherd, pastures and water, and the poetic lilt of the valley of the shadow of death—that they, and we, don't pause at the stunning beauty of the opening phrase.

There are only four Hebrew words in Psalm 23:1—translated “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want”—and to my mind, their most astonishing aspect is passed over almost universally. Our eye and our spiritual sensibilities, it seems, are trained to be drawn more to the pastoral image of what God does in shepherding us than to the simple truth of *who* is doing the shepherding. But the identity of the shepherd is no small thing.

He is “the LORD.” Of all the beautiful words in the psalm, what David is claiming with these first two words is the most staggering.

It is one thing to have a shepherd. That is wonderful. But everyone has shepherds. “The fact is that we are all followers, swept along by a flow of circumstances and experiences and ideas

and people. Even our best attempts to swim against the tide are strangely conformist.”¹ We are each following someone or something all the time; we’re relying on someone or something other than ourselves to keep us safe and protect us and to provide the comfort we need to face life unafraid.

To be told here, however, that it is “the LORD” who shepherds us should stop us in our tracks. As W. Phillip Keller says, “Our view of Him is often too small—too cramped—too provincial—too human.”² In moving so quickly past the significance of the shepherd’s name in verse 1, we lose the deepest beauty of the verse in two ways: we dull the splendor of what it means for this one to be, incredibly, *a* shepherd, and we miss the loveliness of what it means for him to be *my* shepherd.

You will notice that “LORD” is in large and small capital letters. King David here calls God by his personal name. In Hebrew it consists of four letters transliterated as *YHWH*, and in English it is often written as *Yahweh*. This is God’s covenant name, the name God gave to Moses straight after the dramatic encounter with him at the burning bush in Exodus 3. What Moses saw there was part of the visual illustration of what it means for God to be God (the other part of the illustration being the events of the exodus themselves, which would also fill out the content of the divine name). Moses asked God what he should say to the people of Israel if they asked him for the name of the God who

1 Mike Cain, *Real Life Jesus: Meaning, Freedom, Purpose* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 142.

2 W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 2. Another nice exception to the surprising neglect of this detail is David B. Calhoun, *A Sheep Remembers* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2021), 8–11.

had sent Moses to them (v. 13). “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (v. 14).

This unusual self-presentation of God, both in picture (a burning bush that was not consumed) and in words (“I AM WHO I AM”), means several important things for us. It means that, as many commentators point out, God is profoundly mysterious. “By giving us his name, God lets us know who he is. But God’s name is so hard to comprehend—so inscrutable—that it forces us to admit that there are some things about God that we will never understand.”³ So, already we need to add something to the easily understandable and very relatable image of God as a shepherd: the one who is my shepherd is one whom I cannot, in fact, ever fully understand.

This takes on even greater significance when we consider the words of Exodus 3 in relation to the picture of Exodus 3. While scholars debate the best possible translation of “I AM WHO I AM”—whether it could or should be translated as “I am who I will be” or “I will be who I will be”—what is clear is that this unusual rendering of the Hebrew verb meaning “to be” points to “One who remains constant because he is independent.”⁴ Here is God telling Moses that to be God is to be completely and utterly other than us. He is who he is without us. He is eternally who he is from before we were until after we have been. And he is who he is despite our life circumstances.

3 Philip G. Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 86.

4 Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Revelation and God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 554.

When I came to be me, I owed the origin of my life to my parents and the maintenance of my life to the resources of the natural world around me. I have never been able to say that I just “am,” or even that I just “will be” because the very essence of being human is to be a dependent creature. But God is revealing to Moses that his name “the LORD” means that none of those things about me are true of him. God is who he is simply by virtue of being himself. His existence is *from* himself and *for* himself, and there is nothing about him that is derived in any way from anyone else. God is absolutely self-sufficient self-existence, and he is your shepherd.

Perhaps we need the picture of the burning bush to seal the significance of it all. It is true, of course, that fire symbolizes the holiness of God, and this is undeniably a major aspect of what Moses encounters as he witnesses the flames: “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5). I believe this facet of what it means to name “the LORD” as our shepherd is also really important in Psalm 23, as we will see when we come to verse 3.

However, the main point of the bush burning with fire yet not being consumed by fire is precisely to illustrate what we have seen above about God’s self-existent nature. As Sinclair Ferguson says: “The fire that was in the bush was not dependent on the bush for its energy to burn. It was a most pure fire, a fire that was nothing but fire, a fire that was not a compound of other energy sources but had its energy source in itself.”⁵ Moses was given a vivid visual aid to teach him that the Lord is the God who “has all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto

5 Sinclair Ferguson, sermon excerpt in Timothy Brindle, “Self-Sufficiency,” (bonus) track 14 on Shai Linne, *The Attributes of God*, Lamp Mode Recordings, 2011.

himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he has made.”⁶

I tell the Trinity Church family often that the best thing I can ever give them from the pulpit is a clearer sight of God himself and that the greatest thing they can ever have in life is more of God himself. We always want practical religion—effective habits, daily disciplines, lifestyle fixes—and these can all be wonderful if they are full of gospel grace, but the fountain from which they flow is God himself. Whoever you are, and whatever you are experiencing today as you read these lines, there is nothing better to know in all the world than that the shepherd you belong to is the Lord of the burning bush who revealed his name to Moses.

This point is so rich it is worth taking time to linger over it. Consider these words of Alexander Maclaren:

The fire that burns and does not burn out, which has no tendency to destruction in its very energy, and is not consumed by its own activity, is surely a symbol of the One Being, whose being derives its law and its source from itself, who can only say—“I am that I am”—the law of his nature, the foundation of his being, the only conditions of his existence being, as it were, enclosed within the limits of his own nature. You and I have to say, “I am that which I have become,” or “I am that which I was born,” or “I am that which circumstances have made me.” He said, “I am that I am.” All other creatures are links; this is the staple from which they all hang. All other being is derived, and therefore limited and changeful; this being is underived,

6 Westminster Confession of Faith 2.2.

absolute, self-dependent, and therefore unalterable forevermore. Because we live, we die. In living, the process is going on of which death is the end. But God lives forevermore. A flame that does not burn out; therefore his resources are inexhaustible, his power unwearied. He needs no rest for recuperation of wasted energy. His gifts diminish not the store which he has to bestow. He gives and is none the poorer. He works and is never weary. He operates unspent; he loves and he loves forever. And through the ages, the fire burns on, unconsumed and undecayed.⁷

Here is the point of this meandering start to our study of Psalm 23: the one whom you need to shepherd you neither needs you nor needs to be shepherded himself as he gives himself to shepherd you. He shepherds you from his eternally undiminishing fullness, and he is never the poorer for it.

Look how needy David is in Psalm 23. If the Lord is his shepherd, then he is of course portraying himself as sheep-like in all the things he needs. He requires food, rest, water, guidance, shelter, comfort, housing, helping. You name it, David needs it. And here is the question Psalm 23 asks: Can you see who gives David all that he needs? It is the God who needs nothing and no one. The one who essentially says to his people: “I AM WHO I AM.’ Before you were, I was, and after you are no more, I will be. I am the first, I am the last, I am a God outside time before time began.” So in this psalm, David comes alongside you as you read and puts his strong shepherd crook around your shoulder and pulls you in so that you can hear him tell you that the God of heaven can

7 Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 11 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952–1959), 1:23–24; cited in Ryken, *Exodus*, 87–88.

meet your every need precisely because he is the one who has no need of anything himself.

This is where the next phrase in verse 1 (which we will come to in a moment) receives all its meaning: “I shall not want.” Despite my best intentions and my most fervent wishes, I am not the kind of father whose children are able to say, every day, for the rest of their lives, “I shall not want.” I might love them very much and pray for them always and long for their best, but I am a finite, sinful man with limited resources on every hand. I cannot supply their every need as I shepherd them through life. But God is not like that with us. It is one thing to have a shepherd, but it is an utterly staggering thing to have as a shepherd the one who is strength itself, who never tires, never slumbers, and who never needs protection himself. In the words of John Mason’s wonderful hymn:

How great a being, Lord, is thine,
 which doth all beings keep!
 Thy knowledge is the only line
 to sound so vast a deep.
 Thou art a sea without a shore,
 a sun without a sphere;
 thy time is now and evermore,
 thy place is everywhere.⁸

So here is where we touch the wonder of the fact that this one, a God like this, the Lord, might ever be described as a shepherd. Just consider for a moment: What kind of pictures does the idea of

8 John Mason, “How Shall I Sing That Majesty?” (1683), <https://hymnary.org/>.

complete and utter self-sufficient, self-existent deity conjure up in your mind? I think you would agree that this aspect of who God is lends itself most naturally to pictures of strength and power. Indeed, as Kenneth Bailey shows in his wonderful book *The Good Shepherd*, the images used for God throughout the Psalter have a distinctive “homeland security” ring to them. The dominant metaphors are *shield, high tower, fortress, high place, refuge, rock, stronghold, horn of salvation*.⁹

Yet, at the same time, Bailey notes how the Psalter also uses three other metaphors for God—*shepherd* (Ps. 23), *mother* (Ps. 131), *father* (Ps. 103)—and he argues persuasively that when the Lord Jesus wants powerfully to depict who God is toward his weak and wayward people, it is “no accident that the trilogy of parables in Luke 15:1–31 centers on a *good shepherd*, a *good woman* and a *good father*.”¹⁰ In John’s Gospel, the Lord Jesus declares, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). It is a familiar title we know and love, and we are right to see him as the true fulfillment of what it means to call the Lord our shepherd. But in doing so we must remember what Jesus also declared a few chapters earlier in John: “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am’” (John 8:58). This is an astonishing claim. Jesus took the divine name that God revealed to Moses in the burning bush, and he effectively applied it to himself: “I am the LORD.” The Lord Jesus, our good shepherd, is Yahweh himself, which means he is our sufficient shepherd.

9 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 2015), 35. See Ps. 18, for instance, where most of these images are used together for cumulative effect.

10 Bailey, *The Good Shepherd*, 37 (emphasis original).

I hope you can see new layers of beauty to the simple phrase “The LORD is my shepherd.” It is a portrait to communicate that the one at your side has matchless strength and indescribable power, which he is stooping to lend to your aid. As Bailey says, this psalm expresses a profound commitment to God “as the source of security in the midst of many dangers where no other help is available.”¹¹ The self-sufficient God is not the self-absorbed God. The self-existent God is not the self-centered God. Rather—wonder of wonders—the God who is so strong clothes himself in a picture of the closest tender care for those who are so weak. It is a way of saying that he puts all the resources of his infinite fullness at the disposal of finite creatures. He is a shepherd. As Martin Luther says:

The other names sound somewhat too gloriously and majestically, and bring, as it were, an awe and fear with them, when we hear them uttered. This is the case when Scripture calls God our Lord, King, Creator. This, however, is not the case with the sweet word *shepherd*. It brings to the godly, when they read it or hear it, as it were, a confidence, a consolation, or security like the word *father*.¹²

More than this, he is *my* shepherd. In fact, this too is part of the meaning of the divine name revealed to Moses. Theologians

11 Bailey, *The Good Shepherd*, 38. He suggests that, in the many dangers on the open pasturelands of the Middle East, saying “The Lord is my shepherd” means, among other things, “I have no police protection” (37).

12 Cited in William S. Plumer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 309.

are right to say that this divine name “reveals God’s *covenant* lordship.”¹³

Immediately before the words in Exodus 3:14, where God says he is “I AM WHO I AM,” Moses asks God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Ex. 3:11). God’s answer is not to reveal something persuasive about Moses to bolster his confidence; rather, he reveals something about himself: “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain” (Ex. 3:12). God’s name means that he is the sovereign Lord and that he is faithful to his covenant relationships. Who God is coordinates with what God does. “God also said to Moses, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you”’” (Ex. 3:15). Moses is learning that God has his whole family tree in his hand. God is telling Moses that he is the God who goes way back beyond Moses, way back to his fathers, and indeed he is the God who existed way back even before them. The point is that “God’s sovereign independence supports and enables his faithfulness to keep his covenant. Therefore, we can depend upon God to be faithfully present with his people throughout history.”¹⁴ Moses learns that the sovereign Lord is also the covenant Lord. As one Puritan summarized it, “What I was to them, the same will I be to you.”¹⁵

13 Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1:551 (emphasis original).

14 Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1:558.

15 John Preston, *Life Eternall, or, A Treatise on the Divine Essence and Attributes*, 2nd ed. (London, 1631), pt. 1, 96, cited in Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1:558.

Our relationship with God through the Lord Jesus has the deepest possible foundations. We take our place today in world history downstream of God's covenant promises to his people to be with them and to be their God. So our relationship with God is never purely individual and personal, even though it is also never less than that. It is always so much more. The fact that Jesus is a shepherd is wonderful, but the fact that he can be my shepherd is based on his drawing me in personally to a covenant relationship that predated me and will outlast me. The scale of that covenant relationship means I can know he is mine because it is the very meaning of his name to be the God who is faithful to his people.

This profoundly personal aspect to Psalm 23 is very precious. One of the hardest and saddest things I do is take funerals of people who know nothing about the shepherd yet who want the Shepherd's Psalm at their funeral. They have in mind verse 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.

Psalm 23 has become a funeral psalm. But, in fact, it is really a psalm about life. Only one verse out of six speaks about death. The imagery of the psalm is dominated with food, water, rest, security; it's about going to a banquet where you have perfumed oil poured on your head, and you have a cup of wine in your hand, where you have to say to the host, "No, stop, it's overflowing!"

Psalm 23 is about abundant life. It is more about the happiness of living than the sadness of dying, and all of the happiness is bound up with being able to say that this Lord who is a shepherd is also *my* shepherd.

There is a famous story about a young shepherd boy in the Scottish Highlands in centuries past. His parents died prematurely, leaving the boy in the care of his grandfather, a shepherd. The grandson was raised to be a shepherd too, but he was uneducated. He never went to school, and he was unable to read. His grandfather taught him the first five words of Psalm 23 by taking the boy's left hand and, as he said each word, pointing to a finger. Soon the boy could say the words himself, holding one finger and then the next as he did so: "The—LORD—is—my—shepherd."

On one occasion when the boy was out in the hills tending the sheep, a terrible blizzard swept in, engulfing the mountains, and the boy and the sheep did not return home. His grandfather set out to find him, but the brutal winds and blinding snow made that impossible. He knew he would soon lose all sense of direction and so, fearful and heartsore, he returned to spend a long and restless night in his chair. When at last he was able to search the hills, tragically, he found his grandson frozen to death in the snow. But as he stooped to lift the child, he noticed that the boy's hands were clasped in a peculiar way. His right hand firmly gripped the fourth finger of his left hand: "The LORD is *my* shepherd."¹⁶

My calling as a pastor is always to ask people where they are with this shepherd. The members of my congregation are asked all the time by others about their status in relation to something

16 A full version of this story is available at <https://www.fahanchurch.org/the23rdpsalm.htm>, accessed March 2, 2022.

or someone: their vaccine status? their relationship status? their employment status? But the pastor's job is to ask about flock status: Are you a sheep who knows the shepherd?

If you can say that he is *your* shepherd, then I want to show you in what follows that you have everything you will ever need.

