



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## Led By the Shepherd\*

Psalm 23

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### *Introduction*

For major corporations, logos are important, as emphasized in a May 2017 Forbes website [article](#) entitled, “Nine Tips on How to Create a Logo That Perfectly Represents Your Brand.” Their third suggestion recommends designing a logo that reinforces the company’s values at first and second glance.

“Second glance” refers to features in the logo that are at first unnoticed. For example, the white space between the E and X in the Fed Ex logo forms an arrow that’s intended to symbolize speed and precision. And the curved arrow under the name “Amazon” is intended to communicate that the company sells everything from A to Z, the two letters under which the arrow ends. It is also intended to represent the smile the company hopes appears on the faces of customers as they enjoy their shopping experience on the Amazon website.

You may never have noticed these features, but if you are like me, now that you are aware of them, you will never look at those logos the same way again. You have a new perspective.

Gaining a new perspective can also help us when we study familiar Bible passages, especially one as well-known as Psalm 23. As Gerald Wilson wrote,

This is, of course, one of the most familiar and favored poems in the entire book. Such familiarity often heightens the difficulty of the commentator and reader alike to read the psalm anew and to prevent traditional understandings from blinding them to the depths of meaning the psalm offers (Wilson 2002, 430).

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\* The text of this sermon is the adapted version that appeared as an article in *Abundant Living* (ed. Teresa Castleman; Vol. 16, No. 1 [Fall 2022]: 4-7), published by Harding University to encourage, inspire and equip older Christians to grow in faith and service; <https://www.abundantlivingseniors.com/>. To further explain some concepts I did not elaborate in the article version, I have added some Additional Notes at the end.

All Scripture citations herein are from the NIV (2011).

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Many see Psalm 23 only as “the funeral psalm,” a conclusion confirmed when I googled that phrase and a quotation of verse 1 appeared at the top of the search page. Not far below it was a link to “Funeral Lectionary: Psalm 23:1-3, 4, 5, 6 ...”

I do not want to minimize the value of Psalm 23 for funerals but do want to emphasize that it is more than a funeral psalm. When we are open to seeing other things it can teach us, we will find additional strength for living before the funeral.

### *It's About the Shepherd*

What comes to mind when you think of a shepherd? For many of us in the West, our mental image may come solely from idyllic pictures of Scottish hillsides. The perspective of people living in the ancient Near East would have included more. For them, the image of a shepherd was used to refer to gods and kings, in the latter case, specifically to the king's responsibility to provide protection for his people and administer the law with true justice. When the author of Psalm 23 said that the “LORD” (YHWH) was his shepherd, he was affirming that God was the power behind the king's throne. The Lord, not the human ruler, was the true ruler, guide and protector of Israel.

When we look at Psalm 23 more closely, we see that “The LORD is my shepherd” is the theme running throughout the poem, not just its initial declaration. Notice the third person pronouns that refer to the Lord in verses 2–3: “*He* makes me lie down in green pastures, *he* leads me beside quiet waters, *he* refreshes my soul. *He* guides me along the right paths ...” Then, in verses 4–6, the Lord as Shepherd is addressed with second person pronouns: “... *you* are with me, *your* rod and *your* staff ... comfort me. *You* prepare a table before me . . . *You* anoint my head with oil; . . . Surely *your* goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, ...”

This repetition reminds us of an important truth to learn from Psalm 23: sheep cannot shepherd. We need the Lord's guidance along with His protection and comfort. In general terms, we accept that reality, but sometimes are not as open to it when we are the ones He is guiding. With its beginning declaration and emphasis on the Shepherd as the main actor, Psalm 23 reinforces the truth that Jeremiah tried to get the stubborn people in his generation to see: “LORD, I know that people's lives are not their own; it is not for them to direct their steps” (Jeremiah 10:23 ).

### *What the Shepherd Does*

The Lord's actions as Shepherd are described in verses 2–6. In broad terms, He provides abundant life (vv. 2–3), protects His sheep (vv. 4–5), and is always present with His people to give us goodness, love and fellowship (v. 6).

Three especially well-known phrases in Psalm 23 flesh out the nature of the Shepherd's work and presence. Verse 1 says that because the Lord is our shepherd, we “lack nothing.” This is a better translation than the traditional “I shall not want” since the focus is not primarily on desiring or wanting but on lacking or being without. The psalmist's point is not that the Lord gives His sheep all we desire, but that we who trust Him in the way sheep trust their shepherd will never lack for anything we really need. The verses that follow show how He provides for us.

The second phrase is verse 4's assurance that even when we “walk through the darkest valley,” we need not fear evil. As in verse 1, this translation more accurately expresses the psalmist's

point than the traditional “valley of the shadow of death.” The poetic imagery refers to the deep wadis through which Israel’s shepherds would often lead their sheep. The canyon walls on either side cast long shadows and the air at the bottom of the ravines was hot and oppressive. The green pastures and quiet waters they had previously visited were just pleasant memories, far removed from the dark and oppressive reality of the wadis.

The emotional and spiritual darkness of the figure is made more forceful by the combination of two words in the original text that mean something like the most shadowy of all shadows, a figure readily associated with uncertainty, despair and depression. While feelings like these frequently accompany grief, we know they are also at times associated with other troubles in life.

The third phrase of note is verse 6’s affirmation, “I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” Accustomed as we are to Psalm 23’s use at funerals, and in light of Christian teaching about eternal life, it is common to take this phrase simply as a reference to living in heaven forever with God. But that is not the idea that would have first occurred to an ancient Israelite. “The house of the LORD” was the temple, the place God’s people on their periodic pilgrimages longed to reach because it was the Lord’s dwelling place (cf. Psalms 84:4, 10; 122:1). Furthermore, the focus is less on “the house” and more on the fact that the Lord dwelt there. This idea of fellowship with God is reinforced by the expectation that the Lord will bless His sheep with a prepared table and an anointing of oil (v. 5).

### *Reassurance for Modern Sheep*

As we live as the Lord’s sheep today, Psalm 23 should be more than a comforting funeral poem. These stanzas remind us that we are pilgrims walking on what is often a hard road, participating in a journey in which we often feel like “foreigners and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11). But even when the shadows are the longest and conditions most oppressive, we are strengthened by pausing to remember that we follow a Shepherd who gives us everything we need. This includes “green pastures” and “quiet waters,” but also the necessary provisions when the pastures and waters are but distant memories.

Second, Psalm 23 calls us to endure as we walk by faith, to trust that, no matter how long the shadows and oppressive our valleys, the Lord God will protect, guide and shape us to follow a path that conforms to His will. We are walking in a way in which we increasingly come to “share in his holiness” (Hebrews 12:10).

Third, the prominence of the Shepherd in Psalm 23 reminds us to keep our main focus on the Lord, following His example, submitting to His will and comforted in the assurance of His presence (cf. Hebrews 12:2; Matthew 28:20). The psalmist’s attention to the Lord’s house in verse 6 especially helps us recall that the time we devote to worshiping God serves as both a temporary respite from the pressures and threats of our world and a time to renew our confidence that God is in fact with us as we endure our troubles.

### *Conclusion*

“The LORD is my shepherd” is one of the greatest statements of comfort we will ever read. But it is also a confession of trust in God that He has and will continue to provide life to the full (John 10:10), protection and fellowship for all who yield to His guidance. Let us continue to renew our commitment to humbly follow the Shepherd.

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## Works Cited

- Forbes. 2017. "Nine Tips On How To Create A Logo That Perfectly Represents Your Brand." Accessed February 7, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescommunicationscouncil/2017/05/19/nine-tips-on-how-to-create-a-logo-that-perfectly-represents-your-brand/?sh=43703aa11f83>
- James L. Mays. 1994. *Psalms*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.
- Gerald H. Wilson. 2002. *Psalms—Volume 1*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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## Additional Notes

*On a fresh reading of Psalm 23:* It would, of course, not be a bad thing to plow no new ground from a study of Psalm 23; there is merit in being reminded and reassured about things we've heard before. Nor am I concerned with the fact that we typically approach this psalm with a "Christian reading" in view; it reaches its fullest meaning in the Christian idea of Jesus as the Great Shepherd. But it is also helpful to understand that our typical use of Psalm 23 as only "the funeral psalm" and source of comfort may keep us from other layers of meaning and, in fact, from fully appreciating why it was such a source of comfort at all.

*Psalm 23 in light of Psalms 22 and 24:* As noted in the previous [study](#) of Psalm 22, this study is part of a three-sermon arc across Psalms 22–24. Psalm 22.1–21 presents one of the deepest laments in the psalms; in keeping with the depths of that lament, verses 22-31 complete the lament form with one of the most prolonged and hopeful praise sections as we will find in any lament. As a liturgical psalm useful for worship Psalm 24 will return to the praise theme. Psalm 23 is a response to the lament with its own confession, one that itself looks at some of the key themes of lament. It follows naturally from Psalm 22's call to Israel to acknowledge their dependence on YHWH (22.23, 27–29) with vows of praise (22.22; cf. 23.3) that are to be shared in the congregational setting (22.30–31). Although we have not generally heard it expressed this way, Psalm 23 returns to Psalm 22's lament themes in verses 4–5 with their emphasis on dark trials and safety among enemies. These observations should alert us to the possibility of seeing more (though not less) in Psalm 23 than a traditional word of comfort read at a funeral or read as a child's memory verse assignment.

*YHWH and leaders as shepherds:* For examples of texts where YHWH is called Israel's shepherd, see Gen 49.24; Pss 28.9; 74.1; 95.7; 100.3; Jer 31.10; Mic 7.14; where David and later kings are considered YHWH's undershepherds, see Ps 78.70–72; Jer 23.1–4; 49.20; Mic 5.4; for references to YHWH leading and protecting Israel in the wilderness and return from exile, see Pss 77.20; 78.52–53; 80.1; Isa 40.11; 49.9–10 (see Mays 1994, 117).