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Old Testament: Psalm 23

*Context: Psalm 23 is a poetic expression of deep trust in God, traditionally attributed to David, using the **imagery of a shepherd** to describe God's guidance, provision, and protection—even in life's most difficult moments.*

THE DIVINE SHEPHERD

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;
he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I 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 shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

OVERVIEW

Psalm 23 is a short but profound psalm of **confidence and trust**. It moves through three key movements:

1. **God as Shepherd (vv. 1–4)** – Guidance, provision, and presence in hardship
2. **God as Host (v. 5)** – Honor, abundance, and restoration in the presence of enemies
3. **God as Eternal Companion (v. 6)** – Assurance of ongoing relationship beyond circumstances

What's striking is the shift from **talking about God** ("He leads...") to **talking directly to God** ("You are with me"). It becomes personal right at the moment of deepest fear.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediately Before – Psalm 22

Psalm 22 begins with: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*
It is a psalm of anguish and abandonment.



- **Connection:** Psalm 23 answers Psalm 22.
Where Psalm 22 feels abandoned, Psalm 23 declares: “*You are with me.*”

Immediately After – Psalm 24

Psalm 24 shifts to: “*The earth is the Lord’s...*” and celebrates God as King.

Connection:

- Psalm 22 → Suffering Servant
- Psalm 23 → Caring Shepherd
- Psalm 24 → Reigning King

Together, they present a **full theological arc**: suffering, presence, and sovereignty.

Broader Context – The Book of Psalms

- The Psalms are Israel’s prayer and worship book—full of raw emotion: joy, anger, doubt, praise.
- Psalm 23 fits into a category of “**trust psalms**”, where faith is expressed not by denying hardship, but by **trusting God in the middle of it**.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

- Traditionally attributed to **King David**, who was literally a shepherd before becoming king.
- Shepherding in ancient Israel was:
 - Dangerous (predators, thieves)
 - Isolated
 - Required constant vigilance

This is not a soft, pastoral image—it’s a **gritty, survival-based metaphor**.

Politically:

- Israel often experienced instability—war, exile, shifting leadership
- Calling God a *shepherd* subtly contrasts human rulers (often unreliable) with divine leadership (faithful and constant)

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- Likely composed between **1000–900 BCE** (Davidic era, traditionally)
- Psalms compiled over centuries, reaching near-final form around **Post-Exilic period (500–300 BCE)**

So, while rooted in David’s experience, it was preserved because it spoke to **generations facing uncertainty**.

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original Language

- Written in **Hebrew**
- Poetry rich in imagery, rhythm, and layered meaning

Key Translation Layers

- Hebrew → Greek (Septuagint, ~3rd–2nd century BCE)



- Latin (Vulgate, ~4th century CE)
- Early English (Wycliffe, Tyndale)
- **King James Version (1611)** – most familiar phrasing
- Modern translations (NRSV, NIV, etc.)

Key Words with Layered Meaning

- **“Shepherd”**
Not just caretaker—means *leader, guide, protector*
- **“Want” (KJV: “I shall not want”)**
Doesn’t mean desire—it means *lack*.
→ “I shall not lack what I need”
- **“Restore my soul” (Hebrew: *nephesh*)**
“Soul” is not just spiritual—it means *life, breath, whole being*
- **“Valley of the shadow of death”**
Hebrew can also mean *deep darkness*
→ Not just death, but any overwhelming fear or uncertainty
- **“Rod and staff”**
 - Rod = protection/defense
 - Staff = guidance/support
 - God both **protects and directs**

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

This psalm is less about sheep... and more about trusting guidance when you don’t control the terrain.

In a modern context—especially in places like Grant County:

- We live in a time of **information overload**
- Many feel pulled by:
 - National media narratives
 - Political identities
 - Economic uncertainty
 - Decline of local institutions (like local news)

Psalm 23 offers a counter-image: Not “follow the loudest voice,” but “trust the right voice.”

The shepherd metaphor becomes:

- Who are we letting guide us?
- Are we being led... or driven?

The “valley” today might look like:

- Health scares
- Financial stress
- Cultural division
- Fear-based media cycles

And the key shift: Faith is not the absence of those valleys—it’s the refusal to believe we walk them alone.



HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Discern (investigate & seek to understand the truth) the voices we follow**
 - Not all “shepherds” are trustworthy
- **Shift from control to trust**
 - We are not always in charge of outcomes—but we can trust direction
- **Offer presence to others**
 - Sometimes we become the “rod and staff” for someone else
- **Live with quiet confidence, not loud fear**
 - This psalm is calm, not reactive
- **Practice gratitude for “green pastures”**
 - Recognize provision, even when it feels ordinary

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *What does it mean that God is a shepherd rather than a king or judge in this passage?*
2. *Where do you see “valleys” in today’s world—or in your own life?*
3. *What voices act as “shepherds” in our culture today?*
4. *Why does the psalm shift from “He” to “You” in verse 4?*
5. *What does it mean to have a “table prepared in the presence of enemies”?*
6. *How do we reconcile trust in God with real fear and uncertainty?*





Gospel: John 10:1-10

Context: Jesus continues speaking to a skeptical audience, using the familiar image of a shepherd and sheep to reveal what true leadership, trust, and belonging in God's kingdom look like.

JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

“The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again, Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them.

“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

OVERVIEW

In this passage, Jesus presents a metaphor of a sheepfold. He contrasts:

- **The true shepherd**, who enters by the gate and is recognized by the sheep
- **Thieves and bandits**, who try to enter another way
- **Himself as the gate**, the one through whom life, safety, and abundance are found

The central message: *Jesus is both the legitimate leader and the means of access to a full, abundant life—unlike false leaders who exploit and divide.*

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediately Before (John 9)

Jesus heals a man born blind, and the Pharisees respond with skepticism and hostility.

- They question the miracle
- They expel the healed man from the community

Key connection:

John 10 is a direct continuation—Jesus is essentially saying: “Those leaders who cast him out? They’re not true shepherds.”

Immediately After (John 10:11–18)

Jesus expands the metaphor:

- “I am the **good shepherd**”
- The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep



Progression:

- Verses 1–10: Who is legitimate vs. false
- Verses 11–18: What true leadership looks like (self-sacrifice)

Broader Context of the Gospel of Gospel of John

John emphasizes:

- Identity of Jesus (“I am” statements)
- Belief vs. unbelief
- Light vs. darkness
- Truth vs. deception

This passage fits squarely into that theme:

Who do you trust—and why?

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Shepherd imagery was deeply embedded in ancient culture:

- Kings and religious leaders were often called “**shepherds**”
- In the Old Testament (especially Ezekiel 34), corrupt leaders are condemned as **false shepherds**

In 1st-century Judea:

- Religious leadership (Temple authorities, Pharisees) held power over spiritual and social inclusion
- Being “cast out” (as in John 9) meant loss of identity and community

So, this is not a soft image—it’s a critique of leadership systems.

Jesus is essentially saying:

- Some leaders protect and guide
- Others use people for power, control, or status

That would have landed as both spiritual teaching and political tension.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- Event occurs: ~AD 28–30
- Written: ~AD 90–100
- Setting: Jerusalem or nearby, during increasing conflict between Jesus and religious authorities

By the time John writes:

- Christians are being excluded from synagogues
- This “shepherd vs. false shepherd” theme becomes deeply personal for early believers

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original Language: Greek

Key terms:



- **“Shepherd”**
Not just caretaker—also implies *leader, guide, protector*
- **“Gate”**
Literally a door, but metaphorically:
 - Access
 - Legitimate entry
 - Protection boundary
- **“Abundant”**
Often translated “life abundantly”
More accurately:
overflowing, beyond necessity, exceeding expectation

Translation Development:

- Early Greek manuscripts (1st century)
- Latin Vulgate (4th century, Jerome)
- Middle English (Wycliffe Bible)
- King James Version
- Modern translations (NRSV, NIV, etc.)

Important Translation Insight

“Life... abundantly” is often misread as:

- Wealth
- Comfort
- Ease

But in context, it means: **a life of deep meaning, connection, and spiritual fullness—even amid hardship**

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

This passage isn’t really about sheep.

It’s about **discernment and trust**.

The Sheep

Represent people navigating:

- Voices of authority
- Competing truths
- Social belonging

The Shepherd

Represents:

- Leadership that knows, calls, and protects
- Relationship-based authority—not force

The Thieves and Bandits

Represent:



- Systems or voices that exploit fear
- Leaders who divide, manipulate, or exclude

Grant County Connection

Think about:

- Decline of local news vs. rise of national noise
- Social media voices competing for trust
- Community leaders (church, civic, media) shaping narratives

Modern parallel:

- Who are the “voices” we listen to?
- Who actually knows the community vs. who profits from it?

In a place like Grant County:

- A true “shepherd” might be someone who invests locally
- A “thief” might be a distant voice stirring division for clicks or influence

HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Practice Discernment**
Not every loud voice is a trustworthy one
- **Value Relationship-Based Leadership**
People who *know you* are different from people who *use you*
- **Be Wary of Fear-Based Messaging**
Fear is often the tool of the “thief”
- **Seek Abundant Life Differently**
Not just success—but:
 - Meaning
 - Community
 - Integrity
- **Be Shepherd-Like in Your Own Sphere**
Whether in family, church, or community:
 - Guide, don’t control
 - Protect, don’t exploit

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Who are the “voices” you tend to trust most—and why?*
2. *What does it mean to “recognize the shepherd’s voice” in today’s world?*
3. *Where do we see “thieves and bandits” in modern leadership or culture?*
4. *What does “abundant life” look like to you personally?*
5. *Have you ever followed a voice or leader you later realized was not trustworthy? What did you learn?*



Addendums

If you follow Jesus, will you be ridiculed?

Here are the key passages I found:

- **John 15:18–20**
“If the world hates you... it hated me first.”
- **Matthew 5:10–12**
“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake...”
- **2 Timothy 3:12**
“All who want to live a godly life... will be persecuted.”

What’s Going On Beneath the Surface

These verses **don’t promise ridicule as a requirement**—they *prepare* believers for it.

There may be a difference.

- Jesus is not saying: “*If you’re doing it right, people will hate you.*”
- He’s saying: “*If you live differently, don’t be surprised if some people push back.*”

In **John 13:35**, he says people will know his followers by their **love**, not by how much opposition they generate.

Did all the disciples die violent and horrible deaths?

This is one of those statements that **feels certain—but is historically mixed**.

- **Peter the Apostle** – traditionally believed to be crucified (possibly upside down)
- **Paul the Apostle** – likely executed in Rome
- **James son of Zebedee** – clearly recorded in **Acts 12:2** as killed by the sword
- **John the Apostle** – traditionally believed to have died of old age (not violently)

For the others? We’re mostly dealing with **later traditions, not confirmed biblical or historical records**.

So, what do we do with that?

Instead of debating *how* they died, it’s more helpful to ask: ***Why did early Christians preserve these stories?***

- Answer: to show that their faith was **not casual or convenient**.

Ridicule and Violent Deaths

If following Jesus can lead to suffering... why would anyone choose it?

The instinctive answer—“*they found a better ending in heaven*”—is one traditional response, but I understand why that might not fully sit with us. I know it didn’t with me, even though it was my first reaction.

The early followers of Jesus didn’t choose suffering—they chose a way of living that sometimes put them at odds with power, culture, and expectations.



Their lives weren't about seeking death, but about living truthfully, even when it was costly.

And that raises the real question for us—not Will we suffer? but What is worth standing for, even when it's uncomfortable?

A Metaphorical Layer

- “Dying for your faith” doesn't have to mean physical death
- It can mean:
 - *Dying to ego*
 - *Dying to needing to be right*
 - *Dying to control*
 - *Dying to the comfort of staying silent*

In that sense, the disciples' “deaths” become a **pattern of transformation**, not just a historical claim.

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I'VE NEVER SLEPT SO WELL IN MY LIFE



PRAYER PUPS BY JEFFREY SMITH



"SURELY GOODNESS AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE."