

# The Lord IS My Shepherd

*By Vonda Hogle*

Do you have certain scriptures that are your "go to" when you are feeling overwhelmed or anxious? I think the one passage that a lot of people at least reference in their mind, even if it is not necessarily a life verse, is Psalm 23. Next to John 3:16, these are probably the most quoted verses – at least in Western culture. Even if people don't know the actual address of the verses, they are familiar with the verbiage. Movies and television shows will use this passage, and it has even made its way into secular song lyrics. We hear it so much that it almost becomes common, and we miss so much of the richness of this short, six verse chapter.

If you were in church any time before the 1990s, chances are you learned this passage from the King James Version:

**23** The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

<sup>3</sup> He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The old English almost makes you feel as though you can picture it in a Peter Jackson

depiction of a J.R.R. Tolkien novel. The lush rolling hills and teaming streams come to a place of stillness. The valley of the shadow of death looks like a place that you may run to in order to escape the orcs or goblins. Can you picture the table that the Lord would prepare in the presence of our enemies – the grandness of it all?

However, if we look at David's point of reference as he wrote this psalm, having been a shepherd and now seeing himself as a sheep, the picture looks totally different. To help us gain some understanding, I am going to bring in some other translations as we look at this passage verse by verse.

At the start, David states what his position is in relationship to the Lord. "The Lord," he says, "is my shepherd..." To David, this had great significance because he had been a shepherd. He knew that as a shepherd, he was responsible for every aspect of the sheep's life – to feed them, keep them safe, provide and protect them from predators and even themselves at times. So, by making this statement, he is admitting submission and the need for the Lord to take care of him.

Why is that significant? It is because by the time he wrote this psalm, he had not just been a shepherd, but a protector having killed wild beasts; a warrior, having killed a giant and saving the troop of Israel; a leader, having led troops into battle; and a king who ruled over a nation. He was in the highest position of authority, with many people relying on him and looking to him for comfort, leadership, and protection, yet he likens himself to a sheep, a very lowly animal that is totally reliant on someone else for their care. David knew his place, and without the provision and relationship with the Lord, he could not have achieved or done anything for the people he was leading.

Drawing from that shepherding experience, David knew that providing for sheep was no easy feat. He had to know where to take the sheep so that they would have plenty to eat and drink. This meant knowing the lay of the land and what predators inhabited it, and their habits so he could protect his flock. He had to keep track of each and every one, no matter how big or small it was, giving an account for each and every one. David had seen God do these things in his life over and over again, providing from the time he was a shepherd boy all alone protecting his father's flock to when he was King over a powerful nation and all the steps between to get him there. How the Lord did this is revealed throughout the passage.

We tend to gloss over this with the thought of a shepherd being someone who just walked next to a herd of sheep and got them to a place that they could just eat and rest, not understanding how much work goes into herding and protecting them. When we do that, we can't fully understand how the Lord takes care of us. Verse 2 says, "*He maketh me lay down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside still waters.*" Quite a picture. When my mother passed away, our family received three blankets with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm on them, and all of them portrayed a field, a green, verdant field where the sheep didn't even have to bend down to eat because the clover was at mouth height. I can guarantee that was not the picture in David's mind as he wrote those words.

The pastures that David would have led his sheep in were nothing like we think of here in our culture. Our point of reference would be something you would drive past on our farm, an agriculturally rich countryside, but that is not what it would have looked like in Israel. The pastures that David was familiar with would have likely been on a hill or steep incline and would have looked pretty

barren and arid with rocks every few feet. Their yearly precipitation is at least a foot less than we experience annually and mostly concentrated between December and February, leaving three-quarters of the year with the challenge of having enough water to support their agriculture.

A green pasture to the shepherds of Israel isn't what we would call green, but they can see the green in areas that would appear barren to us. Moisture is picked up off the surrounding bodies of water and blows across the hills, where it is then deposited on the rocks. On the sides of the rocks that face the water, there are tufts of grass and vegetation that grow, creating areas of green every few feet.

Shepherds look for these green pastures and lead their sheep there to graze and get their fill. To graze on this terrain, the sheep go from rock to rock, getting the mouthful of greens that form there, then off to the next mouthful. They don't get their entire feeding done in a two-foot square space where they just need to move their necks to their next bite. These sheep have to keep moving toward the next bite. The Shepherd doesn't have them all lie down to serve them. They are active participants in their feeding. Then, when they have all eaten, he takes them to a place to just rest.

So, how does the Lord lead us to green pastures? Well, the pasture is the sustenance for the sheep – the nutrients that are essential for them to live. He has also given us a source for sustenance, and to be honest, ours does look more like the green pastures from the blanket I got at my mom's funeral. We are fortunate to live in a place where we have access to the Word of God, like no other. I am almost ashamed of how many Bibles I have in my home, a lot of which I don't read daily because I do so on a phone,

tablet, or computer. There are Bible studies, sermons, and podcasts where we can gorge ourselves on what God is telling us, but – we are still like the sheep. We have to make the effort to get from one mouthful to the next.

Let's be honest – at times in my life, I spend time in God's word like I'm at a huge family dinner with unending bowls of whatever I want to eat, and I spend time taking it in and discussing things with those at the table, too. Other times, I am going from mouthful to mouthful, trusting that God is going to speak to me right where I am. I might not spend as much time sitting down and reading, but I am listening to it in my car between appointments. In either situation, my Shepherd makes sure that there is enough for what I need – I just need to walk to that next rock.

Then there is the part about Him making us lie down, resting, and slowing down by still waters. The New Living Translation says, "peaceful waters."

As I was growing up, there were some things that were just a part of our Sunday experience. We went to church every Sunday morning, and because my mother was always involved in ministry in one way or another, we were there early and usually were the ones locking up the building. Then, we got to go out to eat. This may seem extravagant, but my single mother worked all week long, then poured herself out on Sunday morning, so this was her one indulgence. Then, when we got home, without fail, we all took a nap. This wasn't a "lie down for a few minutes and rest" kind of nap. This was a "strip down to your slip and crawl back into bed" kind of nap. We slept on Sunday afternoons without the distraction of TVs, computers, tablets, or phones. My mother, as she shepherded us, made us lie down by peaceful waters.

I believe the Lord provides those times for us, too, but too many times, we don't recognize them, or we fill that space with other things. We bring our phone, tablet or computer with us. We can't stay off social media long enough to take in the rest that God desires for us to have – time to truly meditate on what He is feeding us and speaking to us. We are also good at masking our inability to rest by demonstrating what we are hearing from the Lord by posting a verse or passage on Facebook or Instagram. That doesn't count, and it never impresses God.

Verse 3 says, "*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*" What does it mean to "restoreth my soul"? The dictionary defines it as "to bring back to or put back into a former or original state".

Do you remember what it was like when you first started your relationship with the Lord? Or maybe it took a while for you to really trust and completely experience His love and goodness for you. When we are in that place, we tend to stand on the scripture and promises of God with more confidence and rest in who He is and who He says we are. However, over time, day-to-day life tends to set in and chip away at that confidence, that reliance; and we allow doubt to creep in or rely on our own strength to accomplish and dictate what we do. God doesn't want us to stay there, or even worse, continue down that path. His desire is to continually bring us back into a relationship with Him of trust and love and allow it to grow in more depth.

In The New Living Translation, the second part of the verse says, "*He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name.*"

Recently I was traveling with a friend who didn't know how to get to the exact location

we were going but knew part of the way there. I punched in the destination address on Google Maps, and we headed on our way. At one point, the navigation told me to turn down a country road, but my friend insisted that we keep going straight for another mile or so, then turn. This turn took us into a little town, and the speed limit decreased greatly, slowing us down. This road took us through neighborhoods and on twists and turns before heading back out on a two-lane country road. On my way home, I decided to go the way that the navigation had instructed. Rather than going through neighborhoods or the small town, it took us on a much faster route and allowed us to keep our speed with only two turns.

Just like sheep, sometimes when we go our own way to get to where we are going, we go through things we could avoid if we would just follow the Shepherd. While forging our own way, we may run into things that slow us down or could even delay us from getting to where God has planned for us. When we listen for His voice, His direction, the end of our journey, whether it is the one of our complete life or one of the many journeys He takes us on throughout life, will testify of His goodness, protection and provision. When we don't follow His voice and direction, the testimony centers more around how He has saved us from our own poor choices.

In The New International Version, verse 4 says, *"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."* There is so much in this one verse.

First, it doesn't say that we may or may not encounter dark valleys – even the darkest valley. It says even though I do. I know many people who are the first to tell you

how great God is when everything is going their way, but at the first sign of trouble, they begin to question if He is there or if He even cares. We are not promised a life exempt from trouble. We are promised that just like a shepherd doesn't leave his flock when he senses danger but stays with them, guiding them through and fighting to protect them, the Lord is with us. He is not sitting in heaven watching us struggle wondering how we are going to make it. He is Emmanuel, God with us – fully aware of what we are experiencing and facing and preparing our way through it with His protection.

His provision and protection sometimes are not realized at the time. When we look at the tools the Shepherd uses, they sound harsh – a rod and a staff – but they both have important roles in getting the sheep to where they are going safely.

The rod is made from a large piece of wood and usually has a knob at one end. When using it defensively, the Shepherd will throw it at a predator to either injure or kill it or at the least scare it away. It can also be used when one sheep is heading off on its own. The Shepherd will throw the rod on the far side of the wayward sheep to corral it back with the herd.

Have you ever been following what you know God has called you to do, and you come up against opposition? Then, without you having to do anything, the problem goes away or resolves itself? That is our Shepherd throwing the rod at the enemy. Or, have you started to do something that may be just a little off what God told you? It's no big deal and not going to hurt anything when all of a sudden, the thing you were about to do either is no longer appealing or rejects you? He is using that

rod to cut you off from veering away from His plan.

The staff has a long reach and is hooked at the end. Most of us can picture a shepherd using it to hook around the neck of a sheep that is leaving and has gotten farther away than is safe to throw the rod as a distraction. The staff can reach the sheep in places that it may have gone that are too small for the Shepherd to squeeze into to retrieve it. The hook may seem like a harsh way to pull the sheep back, but the Shepherd knows that to get its compliance, he needs to place the hook around the sheep's chin and bottom jaw and gently guide its head in the direction it needs to go.

I think this is one of God's favorite things to use as He shepherds us. When we are going in the wrong direction, He uses so many things to gently bring us back to where we need to be. It could be anything from the word of admonition from a trusted person in our lives to a lyric in a song that reminds us of who we are and what we should be doing.

At the end of the hook on a staff, it curves back up and makes another little hook going the opposite direction. At night, shepherds can stand the staff upright in the ground and hang a lantern on the little hook so he can see the sheep and so the sheep can know where he is. Our Shepherd does the same thing. Even at our lowest and darkest place, we can always know where He is because His promises are the light of hope to see us through our situations.

The last two verses of this psalm change its vantage point from looking at the Lord as our Shepherd to one who hosts us. *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."* (verse 5) This verse shifts our view from being metaphorical in

an intangible way – we are not going to be actual sheep – to metaphors that also could translate literally.

I have always been a bit puzzled by the Lord preparing a table, or as other translations say, a feast, in the presence of those I may be in strife with or literally opposed to. For most of my life in my mind, I could see myself perched at the head of a table with everything delicious spread out before me; and watching my enemies' mouths water as they watch me consume whatever and as much as I want without allowing them to have anything. Nana nana boo boo! Recently, though, as I was reading Jeremiah 29, my understanding has changed.

In Jeremiah 29, the Lord has a word for those who were exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon. We like to quote verse 11 that says that He has great plans for their, and our, lives – for a hope and a future. We are not as quick to quote verses 5-7, *"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."*

Wait, is that right? God wanted those in exile to not only settle in but seek peace and prosperity for the city of Babylon? Really? Then he hits them with the paradox – "Pray to the Lord for it because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

So, knowing the nature of God and that He is not haughty, I don't think He would set us up with a banquet table just to flaunt it before our enemies. What I think He would

do is set us up to host our enemy and show them the goodness of our God, giving them an invitation to come join us and introduce them to the One who provides it all.

The next part of the verse speaks to how the Lord covers us with His presence. In the Old Testament, anointing someone with oil was a demonstration of God's favor and identification of the one He had chosen. For us, it represents God's presence in our lives and that we are each chosen by Him. It is by His presence that we have all that we need in any circumstance.

When David wrote this, he understood the significance of the anointing on a person's head as a symbol of God choosing him; but I believe David was also considering how shepherds anoint their sheep's heads with oil, as well. Shepherds take oil and rub it all around the sheep's eyes and ears because of the species of flies that would be drawn to and gather in those places. As the flies go into their eyes, they not only irritate them but can spread conjunctivitis, or pink eye, which becomes highly contagious and impairs their vision. These flies also make their way into the ears of the sheep and will lay eggs. This can cause problems from clogging their ear canals to the larva boring into their brain and causing them to go mad. When the Shepherd coats the eyes and ears with oil, it provides a layer of protection so that the flies cannot make contact with the skin of the sheep in these vulnerable places.

Still recognizing that the Lord is our Shepherd, His presence – His anointing – is that protection we need from allowing the enemy to attack us in the vulnerable places of what and how we see and hear things, as well as guarding our minds.

When we truly consider all that the Lord has done and continues to do for us, we do not

have the capacity to contain it, and it should flow out from us. It's like when a cup cannot contain what is being poured into it, what is being poured in will spill out on all sides.

This brings us to the end of the chapter – verse 6 *"Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever."* (NLT) David created this whole psalm to illustrate God's goodness towards us and buttons it up with such a great promise.

Surely – confidently, with certainty. David trusted his Shepherd to the point that he could say, without question, that the things he had experienced in his life would not end, but was the foundation of his life that everything rested on. I love the way he sums it up, knowing that the goodness of God would not just be available to him and to us, but it pursues us. The song by Cory Asbury says it so well: "...it chases me down, fights 'til I'm found, leaves the ninety-nine ... the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God." (Reckless Love) Though we may choose to turn away or not accept it, God's action doesn't change. He pursues us because of His love for us. It doesn't hinge on our actions, beliefs, or decisions.

I can't say what "living in the house of the Lord" meant to David personally, but I believe it to be prophetic for us in our day. Jesus told us about it in John 14:2-3 *"My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."* This is the promise that we have to spend eternity with God in the physical, but in 1 Corinthians

6:19, Paul also tells us that we, ourselves, are the house of the Lord: *"Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"* We are the house of the Lord – our physical being – and that cannot be taken away. I think of what a comfort that is to those believers who live in areas of the world where going to a house of worship is not just against the law, but it is also dangerous. They are the house of the Lord. His presence resides and occupies their, and our, very being. What an amazing promise.

David expressed his experience of life in relationship with the Lord by likening it to what he knew at his very core – how to be a good shepherd. As you reflect on this psalm, I hope that looking at it through his experience and perspective–gives you some more depth and understanding of what David was meaning to convey about his Lord. And, if you are up for the challenge, how would you write a psalm of how you view your relationship with God–given your experience and perspective?

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