



December 14, 2014
Psalm 23
Pastor Larry Adams

Jesus our Shepherd

Hey, if you have your Bibles today, I'd like you to turn with me today if you would to Psalm 23, probably the most familiar, best-loved, and best used psalm in all of Scripture. David wrote this psalm. You may have learned it as I did in the King James Version. The NIV is an excellent translation of this psalm. I'll be reading today from that version. Psalm 23, a Psalm of David. Here's what David wrote:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
³ he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
⁴ 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.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

Let's pray together:

Lord, I don't know if any more comforting or reassuring words have ever been written. What matters is whether or not we really believe them and whether or not we truly know you as our shepherd. These words of great comfort have helped Christians through the centuries and are here to guide and comfort and give us assurance as well. God, as we open up this word, speak to us today, help us to see the difference of how we face the world when we know that we have you as our shepherd and we'll thank you, God. In your precious name, Amen.

It was the longest 250 miles I would ever drive, coming back to Connecticut from Maine after burying my father near his childhood home. Beside me as I drove was my 44-year-old mom, a very new widow, and in the backseat my two brothers who were 16 and 15. I looked over at my mom and she started to cry. I felt a little helpless to know what to do when she turned and said to us, "I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you boys." Suddenly for this 20-year-old at the time, the weight of the world suddenly rested on my shoulders as I realized my dad is gone. There is no provider. It's all falling to me. In that moment I realized that I had to start taking full responsibility for my life and maybe even our family, so I dropped out of my third year at college. I went to work full-time. I bought a home, a car. I had my own office. I was driven to achieve because I felt I had to achieve. There was no other remedy for me. No one else would do it or so I thought.

Then in 1977 I met Jesus, my shepherd. I came to know and begin to trust the peace, the assurance, and joy that King David had come to know. I knew about Psalm 23. I think it was even read at my dad's funeral, but I had no idea who the shepherd was. I had no idea what these words meant. Like so many others familiar with this word, they made no impact on my life. But I discovered in those words that I was not alone, and in fact I never had been. I discovered that someone had been watching graciously over my life, given me life and breath and everything else. I had been drinking his water, breathing his air, eating his food, wearing his clothes. I had been provided for by this God, I just had no idea who he was or even why he did what he did. But now I knew. When I asked Jesus into my life, I came into relationship with the one who is my shepherd, the one who really cares, the one who provides, who protects, who fulfills all of his promises. I discovered the one who watches over me. That's the shepherd that David was writing about.

Psalm 23 is the Psalm of the Shepherd. It is poised, as we mentioned last week, in the center of a trilogy of psalms that give us the whole ministry and life of Jesus. Psalm 22, which begins "My God, my God why do you forsaken me?" is the Psalm of the Savior, the very words Jesus would cry at the cross in our place. Psalm 24, the end of the trilogy is the Psalm of the Sovereign, the King, "Open your gates of your life that the King of glory may come in." Perched right in the middle is the most beloved psalm of all, the Psalm of the Shepherd, Psalm 23.

It is the most known, most read, most loved of all the psalms. This psalm has blessed and comforted multiple generations. It has given assurance and hope to millions. It's a psalm born out of David's life experiences with God and in the life experiences he had while watching night after night over his father's sheep. David learned why God refers to people as sheep, because people like sheep are very needy creatures.

We are very fragile actually. We can only go a few days without water, four minutes without air. We need to be constantly provided for and protected. Sheep have to be constantly brought to fresh pastures and still waters. They have to be constantly watched over. Sheep aren't the smartest of creatures. They are easily led astray. They fall prey to impulses, deceptions, and left to themselves they wander away from the shepherd. They are easily lost. They get into trouble, and they can't find their way home. Without someone watching over them, sheep die.

David came to realize that like the sheep he watched over, he too needed a shepherd. We all need a shepherd. The good news is that in Jesus we have one. When you know Jesus as your shepherd, it changes the way you see your life. It changes the way you view your circumstances. It changes the way you face things, and you do not feel that crushing weight of total responsibility that "It's all up to me" because you come to realize in those moments there is one greater than me, bigger than me, stronger than me, wiser than me who has always been there whether I've acknowledged him or not. Now that I know him, he has promised to take care of me and to help me through these times. "The Lord is my shepherd," and that's why Psalm 23 reminds us that Christians can face life with confident assurance because they have the Lord as their shepherd.

How does that give us assurance? As David said, "We have assurance because the Lord is always providing for us. The Lord is always present with us, and the Lord is always protecting us. Jesus as our shepherd is always providing for us." David put it like this in verse 1:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
³ he refreshes my soul.

It was a Christmas time a few years ago, pressures were settling in as they often do for a lot of us during this season. Stresses start to stretch us thin. It seems at those times the littlest things can be the biggest annoyance. I remember this morning I was feeling particularly stressed out.

The toilet broke; I didn't have time to fix it. I had just written out a check to pay for our property taxes which I was thoroughly complaining about. I had learned the day before that our car needed a \$1,600 transmission job. I needed to go out and buy a few last-minute great gifts for some people who I was fairly sure would be unappreciative. I was on my way to our Community Outreach Center where we feed the poor and homeless and have the joy of ministering with them. I was on my way down there for the evening to speak.

I'm embarrassed to tell you my mind was full of my troubles and full of myself when I went into the COC to speak that night. I sat down next to a man I'll call Jim, not his real name, a man I've come to really enjoy and appreciate as I got to know him over the month. But this night would be the first night I'd meet him. I still remember him. He had filthy clothes, filthy clothes. He wore glasses, had a matted beard, a red bandanna, dirty fingernails, with hands and face that were weathered beyond his years. On that cold, rainy, December night he was squeezing his coffee cup as though he was trying to extract every ounce of warmth out of it before he had to go outside.

I sat next to him, as I often do, I love to be there because these are people, people that I love to get to know, people I learn from, people who are often a blessing. I leaned over after I got his name and I said, "Jim, you live around here?"

"Pittsburg."

"Oh, you have a house there?"

"Sort of," he said. "I live in a tree."

I said, "Really? Is it a nice tree?"

He said, "It's adequate for me. It keeps me above the ground. I feel protected."

I said, "Are you staying warm enough?"

He said, "Oh, yes, the Lord provided me a new sleeping bag. It was just out there in the middle of a field. I know the Lord provided it. He meets all my needs."

It was one of those perspective moments that we all need from time to time. Here I am sitting next to a guy that has nothing telling me how good God is for providing all his needs. You know, it reminded me of a time Max Lucado wrote in his book *Six Hours One Friday* when he was a missionary in Sao Paulo, Brazil. He met a homeless boy that taught him some powerful lessons about how God provides.

When God was done with his gentle rebuke, it reminded me that it sounds something like this, "Larry, you tired of fixing that toilet? Jim's bathroom doesn't have that problem. Property taxes on your house too much? I could give you Jim's house. It's tax-free. Transmissions for your car, they are expensive, aren't they? Why don't you try Jim's transportation? He has a shopping cart that he pushes on foot. Too many people to remember at Christmas? I could trade you for Jim's list. He has no one who cares for him."

Max Lucado wrote in his book:

Your complaints are not over the lack of necessities but the abundance of your benefits. You bellyache over frills not the basics, over benefits not your essentials. The source of your problems is your blessings. You're crying over spilled champagne.

The Lord is such an abundant provider we sometimes fail to see how blessed we are. In fact, if we're honest, we're usually not complaining over the basics, it's all the extras we're upset about. They're the ones that cause our problem.

David came to realize that the Lord was his provider and that he could trust him to meet his needs in every situation, and, as David learned, there's a lot of difference between the needs and the wants. God is such a good provider he gives us many of our wants. He promises to meet our needs in every situation. That's why David could say in verse 1:

The Lord is my shepherd,

Or in the King James says, "I shall not be in want" or "I shall not want."

I lack nothing.

David could say that whether he was hiding out in a cave, on the run from King Saul, or whether he was in the king's palace.

I lack nothing

Could you and I say that today and sincerely mean it? To say, "God, thank you for being my provider. I lack nothing. I'm content with what I have. My needs are met." He meets all our physical needs. Psalm 23 verse 1:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
³ he refreshes my soul.

Did you see verse 2?

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

He meets all our physical needs.

Phillip Keller wrote a book some time ago called *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*. Being a shepherd he could have some pretty good insights into what David was writing. Green pastures and quiet waters are just two elements of a sheep's need. Apparently they need green pastures. They cannot find them on their own, so they have to be led to them. Philip Keller said in his book that the sheep he tended could not drink out of a fast flowing stream. It had to be still water. Those two things simply remind us sheep had many needs. The shepherd knows those needs and how to lead the sheep to what the needs are and how they are met. The shepherd takes care of those needs.

The Lord is our shepherd, and he takes care of our needs too. In fact, Jesus knows our needs better than we do which is why he told the disciples not to worry about their basic needs. Do you remember in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6 verse 25?

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or

‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

You see the contrast? The pagans, the people who do not know God, do not know him as their shepherd, who are worried about everything because they see themselves as the provider, are chasing after all of these things that God has already said, **“I know you need them. I know you have to eat. I know you need clothes, and you need a roof over your head. I know you need those things. So why are you spending time like the pagans chasing what I’ve already promised to provide?”** It’s a good question, isn’t it? Because we often are not satisfied with our needs being met.

Our view of needs is cultivated by a culture, not by God. We have all these things we think we have to have in order to be satisfied. You all know, like little kids, we get the present we want and – what? We’re excited about the next one because we’ve already lost interest in this one. Things don’t satisfy. They were never meant to. Needs were meant to be supplied, and God takes care of that. The problem is we don’t know our needs as well as Jesus does, and we end up chasing after stuff that we end up worrying about and can’t hold onto.

It’s why Paul always taught that we need to learn contentment. I struggle with us as much as anyone. What Paul wrote to Timothy, who was taking over leadership of a very strategic church at Ephesus, he wrote in 1 Timothy 6 verse 6:

But godliness with contentment is great gain.⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.

You come with nothing, you leave with nothing. You’ve heard it said, “There is no U-Haul behind the hearse.”

⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

Really? If I have enough to eat and clothes to wear I can be content according to God.

⁹ Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

God has enabled some people to handle wealth well. When they do, God’s glorified, the kingdom advances, and the wealth never owns them. But you’ve seen far too many times when people are given wealth and they don’t handle it well. It destroys them. People have asked me sometimes, “Larry, do you play the lottery?”

“No, I don’t.”

“How come you don’t?”

“Two reasons: Number one I’m afraid I might win; and secondly, I can’t be telling God every time I go buy a ticket ‘I’m not satisfied with the way you’re providing for me, so I think I’m gonna up my odds.’”

You see, the truth is God has put into our hands what he believes we can manage. I’m not sure that I manage what he’s put there now all that well. I need to learn contentment with what God’s placed in my hands so then I’ll know what to do with whatever else he gives me. God is a great provider. That’s why Paul went on to tell Timothy in 1 Timothy 6 verse 11:

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 6 verse 33, **“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and (what?) all these things you worry about will be given to you as well.”** Maybe not the house you dreamed of. Maybe not the cars you thought you deserved, or maybe not the money in the bank you thought you should have, or the clothes that are gonna be the latest trends. Maybe you're not gonna be eating gourmet, but God said, **“You're gonna eat. You're gonna have clothes, and I'll put a roof over your head. You follow me as your shepherd and your needs are gonna be met.”**

Not only our physical needs, but Jesus meets our spiritual needs, our soul needs. Look at verse 3:

He refreshes my soul.

Physical rest can restore your body, but where do you find rest for your soul? We all have a tendency to get stressed out. Things get pretty overwhelming. All of us feel it. This time of year doesn't help any normally. So when we are all stressed out, we feel like we got a little more than we can carry, what do you usually hear people say? “I need a break. I need a vacation.” So sometimes, if we're fortunate enough, we'll take a break or a vacation and what happens? We come back more stressed out and more tired than when we left. It isn't that we don't need physical breaks from the routines. We do at times. We need physical rest. That's why God makes us sleep however little of it we may get. But many times our biggest problem is not the physical tiredness we feel from the efforts we expend, it's the soul and spiritual needs where we are exhausted which takes a toll on your body. If you don't address those soul spirit needs, your body can be perpetually tired on a perpetual vacation.

So where do your soul needs get restored? Jesus is the only one who can refresh your soul. He's the only one who can refresh your spirit. He does it through his word. He does it in times of prayer. He does it by reassuring us of his goodness, his power, his plan, and his promises, and he refreshes us by his Holy Spirit who renews our strength. Because of that, you can have your soul restored even in the midst of the stress.

Sometimes when I'm driving alone I love to envision Jesus sitting in the seat next to me and I just talk with him. “Jesus, I'm really stressed out today. I've got more to do than I can possibly do. I need your help. I need you to help me to prioritize. I need you to help me to show me what to do. I need you to lead me.” I talk to him.

I hope this doesn't sound too corny, but sometimes when I pray I get down on my knees at home next our couch. I envision Jesus sitting there, and I just put my head in his lap. “Jesus, here I am again. I'm so overwhelmed. I don't know what to do. I don't have the answers. So many are looking to me for solutions I don't have. Lord, show me what to do. I'm running out of gas.” I'm telling you in those times, if you've been there you know what I'm talking about, God begins to refresh your soul by reminding you he is in charge. He is good. He's there. I don't have to worry. He's taking care of it.

“Do what I've called you to do and leave the rest to me,” and he lifts that burden off your shoulders. He restores your soul. Suddenly there's a little bit more of a spring in your step. You got an ability to go out now and handle some of the things in his strength that you before thought you could never do. You found your soul strengthened in him. David said:

The Lord is my shepherd.

It's interesting in the original the emphasis is on the word "my."

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

Is the Lord your shepherd? Not only always providing for us, but Jesus is our shepherd who is always present with us. I love this. Verse 3:

He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,

Or "through the valley of the shadow of death" both of those are excellent translations.

I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

I was reading a piece from a book by Larry Libby called *No Matter What, No Matter Where* when he was talking about his father-in-law Bob who loves to hunt deer in the mountains of north central California every fall. By the way, if you're not a hunter and you hate all those stories, don't worry. Nobody or nothing dies in this story so you can just relax. He said in the book:

A number of farmers and ranchers in the area are willing to let individuals or small groups hunt on their property if the hunters ask permission and show respect for the land. My father-in-law's the most congenial man I've ever met. It would take a surprisingly cranky landowner to turn him down.

Last year he approached a rancher and asked him if he might drive through a certain gate and do some hunting in the evening when the shadows lengthen and the October sun slips low in the west. Deer begin to venture forth from their hiding places to graze. The rancher gave Bob a thoughtful look and said, "Yeah. You can come on the land, but you'd better let me ride with you in the truck for a while. I want to show you something."

I can imagine most men thinking, "Aw, come on. 'Show me something.' Why do I need a passenger? Either let me in or tell me to stay out. I know how to drive. I know how to hunt. I'm a big boy, and I don't need a chaperone."

Bob, however, being the man he is, cheerfully assented, and the pair drove through the gate into the ranch. They had been skimming across the wide, seemingly featureless field when the rancher suddenly said, "You'd better start slowing down here." Why? Had he seen a deer? Bob pulled his foot off the accelerator. But why stop? As far as he could see there were no creeks, no gullies, no fences, no nothing, just a wide open pasture stretching out to the dusky foothills.

"Okay," said the rancher. "You'd better park right here. I need to show you something." Bob did as he was told. They got out of the truck in the cool mountain air and began walking. Then the rancher put his hand on Bob's shoulder, stopped him, and said, "Look up ahead and move slowly." My father-in-law walked slowly forward and then stopped dead in his tracks. Cleaving at right angles across their path and across the pasture as far as they could see in both directions was a yawning, black chasm making a tear in the surface of the earth. Where they stood, the crack was probably 30 feet across. Peering over the edge, the hair on Bob's neck bristled.

“Where is the bottom,” he asked. The sheer rock-ribbed sides of this great volcanic fissure plunged to unknown depths. Cold still air seemed to exhale from the blackness below. Walking back to the truck Bob realized that he would've never seen that impending danger and would've driven his truck full speed into a bottomless chasm. He said, “I realized in that moment that having a guide wasn't such a bad thing, and I gained a new appreciation for a man who knew the terrain and where to park the truck.”

David said, “I have the Lord as my co-passenger. I have the Lord as my shepherd. I'm never alone. He knows the terrain, and he knows where to park the truck. ”The Lord is always with us,” David said in verse 3:

He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
⁴ 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.

God is there to guide us. He guides us through his Word, and he guides us through his Holy Spirit. His Word is precious. You can't navigate the many twists and turns of life effectively without it. You can't.

One of the reasons I love Psalm 119 is not its length but its focus. It's all focused on the immediacy, the primacy, the importance of the beauty of God's Word. Listen to just this one section from Psalm 119 verse 97:

Oh, how I love your law!
I meditate on it all day long.

Really?

⁹⁸ Your commands are always with me
and make me wiser than my enemies.
⁹⁹ I have more insight than all my teachers,
for I meditate on your statutes.

You can have all the learning you want, but if you don't know God's Word you have no wisdom.

¹⁰⁰ I have more understanding than the elders,
for I obey your precepts.

You can have all the experience there is, but the experience won't teach you what you need to learn if you don't have God's Word telling you.

¹⁰¹ I have kept my feet from every evil path
so that I might obey your word.
¹⁰² I have not departed from your laws,
for you yourself have taught me.

“You yourself have taught me.”

¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
¹⁰⁴ I gain understanding from your precepts;
therefore I hate every wrong path.

Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light on my path.
¹⁰⁶ I have taken an oath and confirmed it,
that I will follow your righteous laws.

I say this for no other reason than to let you know I honestly don't know how you live a day rightly without God's Word coursing through your mind and heart. I don't know how you do it. I can't do it. I am so prone to seeing things I think clearly and making assumptions that aren't right. I see the path I think I ought to take, and it ends up being the wrong one. I hear and see things I don't understand, so I respond in ways that are inappropriate. The only way I counter that is every morning if I could have God speaking to me, filling my mind and heart with his truth, I have a chance then of relying on that Word rather than all the voices that compete with his. And, when I choose to walk a path, you have a lot more confidence he's actually leading it because you come to hate the wrong paths because you recognize them quicker.

If that were not enough, not just his Word, he guides us by his Holy Spirit. Do you remember when Jesus was with the disciples the night before he went to the cross in the upper room at the Last Supper? They know he's leaving. They're terrified. They're afraid. Jesus said them in John 14 verse 15:

If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

When the Spirit of God comes into your life, in that moment when you're born again and you come into relationship with God, you don't just get the Holy Spirit, you have the fullness of the Godhead: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus is in you.

¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

On what day? **"On that day when the Holy Spirit comes to live in you, you're gonna know I'm in you."**

²⁵ "All this I have spoken while still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

"I'll give you my peace," he said. **"My peace. I'll be right there with you to give it."** You know how many times the reason we don't experience that kind of peace? Because we don't know what we're looking for. He says, **"I don't give it the way the world does."** The world gives peace that sounds like what? Peace to the world is the absence of all conflict. Have you found that world yet? I haven't found it. Jesus said, **"I'm gonna give you my peace, but not the way the world gives."** Peace is not the absence of conflict. Real peace is knowing you have God in the midst of the conflict. That's the peace. It's a peace that Paul told the Philippians passes all understanding, to guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.

It doesn't make any sense to most people. But if you've ever been in that place where all you have is Jesus, you find out he's enough and you have a peace the world can't understand. The world cannot understand it. That's why David said in verse 4:

Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,

The shadow of death: that illness that's gonna claim my life, that financial setback I can't see how I'm gonna recover from and may lose everything, this relationship I'm in that's blowing apart and I have no future. I don't know what your darkest valley is. David had a bunch of them, but he said, "When the Lord's my shepherd, even though I walk through the darkest valley"

I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;

He's in the truck. He knows the terrain. He knows where to park. He'll guide us. But not only that, he knows how to comfort us. He knows how to comfort us:

your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

The rod and the staff were a shepherd's indispensable tools. The rod was more like a club. It was a weapon that would drive away anything that would threaten the sheep and they knew how to use it. The staff is that long traditional thing you often see in plays and stuff, the long staff with the crook on the end - a shepherd's staff. It was long so he could reach out way in front of him and tap the sheep gently on the side keep them on the path. When they got off track or they got stuck in a hole or in the mud or wherever they were, he could reach down with that crook and lift them back to safety. David said, "The Lord is my shepherd. He's got a rod and he's got a staff, and they comfort me because I know that where I walk I do not walk alone. He is always with me. The Lord is my shepherd. I will fear nothing because he's always present to guide and comfort me."

And not only always providing and always present, but Jesus is our shepherd who is always protecting us. It says in verse 5:

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

You may have heard the name Courtney Birdsey. She was touring the interviewers and television shows and other avenues of media outlets when she came back from her tour of duty in Iraq. I wouldn't say she was famous, but you may have heard of her. I read this piece of her testimony taken from *Today's Christian*. Here's what she said:

On one of our missions, my unit made a return trip to Samarra, north of Baghdad to gather data. As we were leaving the town, the Humvee I was riding in approached a tank from behind. The soldier riding on the tank gave us an urgent "turn around" signal. We didn't hesitate to follow orders.

We doubled back to Samarra only to find ourselves surrounded by gunfire. All of us jumped out of our vehicle and took cover, some of us running ahead and some of us staying with the Humvee. I readied my weapon and hunkered down against the back corner of the Humvee.

Amid the gunfire, a black BMW sped through the street at 70 miles an hour. The Iraqi passengers inside lowered the windows, pointed out their guns, and sprayed gunfire at every American soldier they saw. We exchanged shots and suddenly the BMW careened out of control toward the Humvee where I was crouched. I could see the driver slumped over from the steering wheel, obviously hit, and I knew I had only seconds to make a decision. With my heart pounding and unformed prayers rising in my mind, I ran to the front of the vehicle just before the car slammed into the very place I had been just seconds before.

We were told that we would have to transfer the wounded in our own vehicle. In the background, completely incongruent to the battle I was facing, I could hear the droning of Muslim prayer chants over the loudspeaker. My convoy was commanded to drive to an American safe house on the outskirts of town. The chanted prayers and the lamb-like groans of dying men echoed behind me in my head.

Finally we arrived at the safety of the compound. I looked down at my uniform, dirty and speckled with the blood of the wounded. I stepped out of the truck, dropped shaking to my knees, thanking God for our safety.

After this encounter, my faith took on a deeper and more personal perspective. I had felt the protective hand of God as we returned to our base physically unscathed. For my remaining time in Iraq, I began to rely heavily on my constant communication with God. Praying without ceasing became for me as natural as breathing.

People, you don't know God like that until you're in a situation like that. You don't see God's protective hand sitting on a beach sipping your favorite beverage with the cool breezes wafting in around you. That's not where you learn God's protective hand. You learn God's protection over you when you're in a situation that if you know God doesn't show up you're done. They are the scariest moments of our life, and God allows them to teach us that he's protecting us. He's setting the boundaries.

God doesn't protect us from every scary experience, but he does protect us in every scary experience. That's what David learned. "The Lord is our shepherd who protects and watches over us. In verse 5:

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of our enemies." David was very realistic. No Pollyanna here. We have enemies. Satan is the enemy of every believer. The more you live for Jesus in a world that doesn't want him, the more you're gonna feel the backlash of that. We have enemies, but we also have enemies because we live in a fallen world. People want to take your money, steal your car, do you bodily harm to get what you have because they want it. They're there.

God never promised that when we have him as our shepherd we wouldn't have the enemies. He said, **"You'll be in the presence of your enemies when I do, what? Spread the table before you. In the midst of your enemies when the things are the scariest, you are gonna see my hand of provision unfold before you. You're gonna see it. I will set the boundaries**

of it.” Jesus said in John 16 verse 33, **“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”**

“I have overcome the world. You'll know my protection even the midst of those scary trials.”

One of the psalms I love to read is believed to have been written by Moses. He wrote Psalm 90. Many think he wrote Psalm 90 through 100, or 90 through 99. Psalm 91, whoever wrote this had a great insight to this. Listen to this, Psalm 91 verse 1:

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

I love that because you can't rest in anyone's shadow unless they're standing near enough for the shadow to fall over you.

² I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.”

³ Surely he will save you
from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.

⁴ He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

⁵ You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,

⁶ nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.

⁷ A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.

⁸ You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

If you say, “The Lord is my refuge,”
and you make the Most High your dwelling,

¹⁰ no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.

It sounds a lot like God saying, “You know what? If I make the Lord my shepherd I won't ever have to go through anything.” Well, that's not what he just said. He said, **“No harm will come to you. No harm will come to you.”**

We shared last week it's very important for us to understand that the only thing Satan can touch, the only thing the enemies can touch, the only thing that people can take is everything outside of you including your body. It's all they can hurt. They can torture it. They can kill it. They can beat it up, but no one can ever touch you, the real you inside there. No harm will ever come to you when you have the Lord as your shepherd. That's why David could say in verse 6:

Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,

Your goodness and your steadfast love, your mercy, a love that never moves, will follow me all the days of my life. So no matter what my situation is, God, I know that your goodness and love will always be there. Should it claim my body or anything else, I know that my future is secure.

I'm protected because I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Your goodness and love follows me now, and it will follow me in those moments. If it's the means you use to transport me off planet earth then I'm gonna live with you forever, and that goodness and love is gonna follow me forever and ever and ever and ever. No harm can come to me.

It doesn't mean we won't go through scary times. It means when the Lord is your shepherd you lose nothing. Your cup can really overflow even in the presence of enemies. You've been anointed by God. You're his. He's your protector, and he's gonna see you safely home. That's a promise.

You know, this last week I've been looking over my life thinking of all the ways that Jesus has shepherded me even when I didn't even know who he was or even gave him the time of day. God made me, put me in the world, chose where I would live, gave me the parents I was to have, gave me whatever gifts or ability are mine.

In the early days he spared me from so many childhood illnesses. I had them, but he saw me through them all. He spared me when my clothes caught on fire when I was three. My grandpa was burning brush. It should have been toast for me, but he spared me. He spared me when I almost drowned when I was 10. Still to this day I don't know how that guy saw me and pulled me up. He spared me and my friends and protected us when we are attacked by a gunman when we were 19. He provided for me when I had a number of times of being unemployed. I had debts I wasn't sure how I was gonna pay, and I don't know how it was but every time God would give me a little something to do here, a little something to do there, and somebody would pay me this or that and there would always be enough to just make it. He was doing all that even though I didn't know it.

I was thinking this week of at least two times he spared me from two near head-on collisions at night when there was no way I could've responded in time to avoid that vehicle. Somehow at the last moment it veered off and missed me. God did that. He has protected me through the years through many of my stupid choices, many of which could have cost me my life and should have. He's protected me even recently from events I would never choose or want anybody to go through, but I'm telling you, God set the boundaries. He didn't spare me from all the trial, but he protected us in it.

You see, the Lord has always been there. It's just for a good part of my life I didn't even know it was him. I didn't know it was his water I drank and his air I breathed. I didn't know it was his clothes I wore, his money I spent. But when I met Jesus, now I knew, and I have a different relationship with the shepherd now. Now, I have his promise to provide for me, to be present with me, and to protect me. I know that no matter what happens in that darkest valley, we all have them; no matter what happens in the face of enemies, and we all have them; no matter what happens, his goodness and love is gonna follow me. He'll always be there. The weight of the world is not on my shoulders, it's on his. When it's all done, I'm gonna go home and it's gonna continue forever and ever and ever.

Jesus said in John 10 verse 14:

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

That's why Jesus came at Christmas. It's why he died on a cross. It's why he rose again. It's why he's alive with us today. He's our shepherd. Peter said in 1 Peter 2 verse 25, "For you were like sheep going astray," but not anymore. Now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

People, when you know, I mean really know that the Lord is your shepherd, you will be able to say like David, "I lack nothing. Your goodness and love do follow me, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Father, thank you for being that shepherd for us. I wish it could be that sin didn't exist, and all this pain and junk we go through didn't happen, but it does. But we never face it alone. You're always there, always providing, always present, always protecting. We know that even if some day it steals our body away, we're gonna be more alive than we've ever been. We're gonna be with the good shepherd forever. Thank you, God, for that promise. May it change the way we live. May it change the way we see our circumstances. May it change the way we walk at times through that dark valley. May we know in it all that we have the best . . . Thank you, God. We pray this in your precious name, Amen.