

Message
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The 23rd Psalm... words of comfort and reassurance. It's said to be the most loved Bible verse, the words most often requested at funerals even among those who say they are not religious. If you are - like me - of a certain age, your brain may go back to the old King James version the way mine does. We just heard Dan read the Revised Standard version, written in 1946. It still has the shalls and the Thous and Thys, but no maketh or leadeth.

The first alternate version I read that really reached me is from the Living Bible: "*Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need! He lets me rest in the meadow grass and leads me beside the quiet streams. He gives me new strength. He helps me do what honors Him the most. Even when walking through the dark valley of death I will not be afraid, for You are close beside me, guarding, guiding all the way. You provide delicious food for me in the presence of my enemies. You have welcomed me as Your guest; blessings overflow! Your goodness and unfailing kindness shall be with me all of my life, and afterwards I will live with You forever in Your home.*" The Living Bible was written in 1971, though I didn't find it until the late 80s. It was the first Bible I bought for myself, and it's still my favorite translation, the one I go to first when I'm looking for a certain verse. All because when I read this version of the 23rd Psalm, for the first time I felt drawn into a Bible verse. I felt it speak to my heart as it painted a word picture for me, one that invited me to stop and rest in the meadow grass, to listen to the words, to feel the emotions and try to figure out how they applied to my life. That is the power of finding a translation or version of the Bible that speaks to you.

Then, I found The Message, Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible, published in segments from 1993 to 2002. Peterson has said that The Message was simply his way of making the Bible relevant and understandable to the members of his congregation, and that he published it to help all of us relate to God in a more personal way. It doesn't appeal to everyone, but his way with words has made the Bible and the stories it has for us more attainable and understandable to millions of people.

Psalm 23 in The Message says:

GOD, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from.

True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side.

Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of GOD for the rest of my life.

The meaning is the same, but for me it painted an even more personal invitation, an even more intentional connection to God. Imagine being chased by God!...

Over the years, I've read many versions of Psalm 23, even led a group exercise in writing our own version of these powerful verses. Yet, as I was reading the various translations of this psalm to prepare for this service, something I'd never considered before popped into my mind. Jesus is the embodiment of the 23rd Psalm. I wasn't sure about that at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I saw it. Now, I know others who are more knowledgeable than I am have seen this before, but it was new to me and I'm thinking that might be the case with you too. So, let's take a closer look, using The Living Bible translation as our starting point.

Verses 1-3 say: *Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need! He lets me rest in the meadow grass and leads me beside the quiet streams. He gives me new strength. He helps me do what honors Him the most.*

A shepherd's job is to do whatever it takes to make sure the sheep have what they need - good grass to eat, fresh water that is easy to access, a safe place to rest so they can continue the climb up the mountains ahead of them.

Jesus' entire public ministry was spent caring for all those He came in contact with, not just physically but spiritually. Jesus worked to bridge the gap between the people and God, guiding their steps, their minds and their hearts with His words and His actions; giving His time, His energy, and eventually His very life.

Jesus Himself said that He is our Shepherd. In John 10:11-14 He says *"I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary. A hired man is not a real shepherd. The sheep mean nothing to him. He sees a wolf come and runs for it, leaving the sheep to be ravaged and scattered by the wolf. He's only in it for the money. The sheep don't matter to him. I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me."* (The Message)

We the "sheep" can find rest and strengthening, because of Jesus' love and example and sacrifice. When we trust God, when we rest in Jesus, we find our well-being restored - we have everything we need.

Verse 4 says *Even when walking through the dark valley of death I will not be afraid, for You are close beside me, guarding, guiding all the way.*

The New Living Translation puts it this way: *Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and Your staff protect and comfort me.*

In *What are the Basics of Sheep Herding*, Jessica Ellis writes "Sheep are believed to have poor depth perception, meaning that it is vital for shepherds to know and understand the terrain. Panicked sheep have been known to stampede off cliffs, and even an absentminded sheep can end up in life-threatening situations due to this issue. Generally, sheep are grazed in penned pastures where this is not an issue, but sheep that graze in highland areas or on mountains must be watched and guided carefully around any dangerous precipices." To do this, the shepherd uses his crook or staff as a gentle prod to guide the sheep along the intended path, but also as a means of pulling them back from danger. Because the shepherd looks beyond the immediate vicinity, looks at the bigger picture to protect the sheep, the shepherd sees things the sheep can't or won't see. Jesus knew things the disciples didn't

know, understood things in a way His followers – including us – couldn't understand. Because of that, we don't have to be afraid. Jesus physically walked beside His followers on the difficult path of His public ministry. And though He is not physically here with us, Jesus still walks with us, gently guiding us so that we don't have to be afraid, and so that we don't have to remain in penned pastures.

And death? The thing so many of us fear the most? Jesus walks with us every step of that part of our journey as well. He is the only one to have been there and come back to us, and because of that we don't need to be afraid.

In John 10:25-30, Jesus is talking to the Jewish leaders and says: *I have told you, and you do not believe. The works I am doing in My Father's name tell the truth about Me. You do not listen; you lack faith because you are not My sheep. My sheep respond as they hear My voice; I know them intimately, and they follow Me. I give them a life that is unceasing, and death will not have the last word. Nothing or no one can steal them from My hand. My Father has given the flock to Me, and He is superior to all beings and things. No one is powerful enough to snatch the flock from My Father's hand. The Father and I are one.* (The Voice translation) Because of Jesus, our shepherd, "death will not have the last word" ...

Verse 5 says: *You provide delicious food for me in the presence of my enemies. You have welcomed me as Your guest; blessings overflow!* Now the first place my mind went with this was the miracles Jesus performed with the feeding of the 5 thousand and the feeding of the 4 thousand. But reading The Passion Translation of this verse put a different light on it. This is when the whole concept of Jesus as the embodiment of this psalm came to me. It says *You become my delicious feast even when my enemies dare to fight.* Jesus was the "feast" spread out in front His enemies.

Luke 22 verses 19-20 tell us that on the night before He died Jesus shared one last meal with His disciples: *Then He took a loaf of bread; and when He had thanked God for it, he broke it apart and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, given for you. Eat it in remembrance of me." After supper He gave them another glass of wine, saying, "This wine is the token of God's new agreement to save you—an agreement sealed with the blood I shall pour out to purchase back your souls.* (The Living Bible)

Jesus welcomes us into this amazing sacrifice that He made on our behalf, and we are blessed by His generosity. Even today, Jesus offers Himself for our sakes in front of the doubters and haters.

The Voice translation of the second part of verse 5 is a bit different: *You care for all my needs, anointing my head with soothing, fragrant oil, filling my cup again and again with Your grace.* According to Farm and Animals, placing oil on the sheep's heads is still done, and has several distinct purposes. During breeding season, the oil can help the rams' heads slip past each other and minimizes the risk of serious injury and even death. In summer, the oil helps repel flies. Hovering flies can cause sheep to panic and run wildly, which may cause injury or death. The oil can also have medicinal effects to minimize infection and even prevent parasite infestation. Now, we may butt heads at times and the annoyances in our

lives may buzz around like flies, but we don't need oil on our heads like real sheep; still our Good Shepherd watches out for us and offers us boundless grace over and over again...

Your goodness and unfailing kindness shall be with me all of my life, and afterwards I will live with You forever in Your home is the final verse. The Voice version says: *Certainly Your faithful protection and loving provision will pursue me where I go, always, everywhere. I will always be with the Eternal, in Your house forever.*

In Romans 8:38-39 Paul reminds the new Christians in Rome, and Christ's followers today, that Jesus' unfailing kindness, His faithful protection, His loving provision, is always with us. Paul wrote: *For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from His love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels won't, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, or where we are—high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean—nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when He died for us.* (The Living Bible)

And in John 14:2-3, Jesus Himself told us that we can live with Him forever in His home. He said: *There are many homes up there where my Father lives, and I am going to prepare them for your coming. When everything is ready, then I will come and get you, so that you can always be with me where I am. If this weren't so, I would tell you plainly.* (The Living Bible)

So, Jesus: cares about our every day needs (verses 1-3); guides our steps as we journey with Him, even through our darkest times (verse 4); offers Himself for our redemption and safety, no matter how many times we need His grace (verse 5); and has prepared a forever home for us in heaven with Him (verse 6). I'd say that makes Him a Good Shepherd, so that we can say *The Lord is my Shepherd...*

I'd like to leave you with The Passion Translation of Psalm 23. But first, I'd ask you to prepare yourself to really hear the words. Take a moment to make yourself comfortable... close your eyes... take a deep breath in... and breathe out the distractions ... take another deep breath in...and breathe out the doubts... Open your heart to the message God has for you today in these words...

Yahweh is my best friend and my shepherd. I always have more than enough.

He offers a resting place for me in His luxurious love. His tracks take me to an oasis of peace near the quiet brook of bliss.

That's where he restores and revives my life. He opens before me the right path and leads me along in His footsteps of righteousness so that I can bring honor to His name.

Even when Your path takes me through the valley of deepest darkness, fear will never conquer me, for You already have! Your authority is my strength and my peace. The comfort of Your love takes away my fear. I'll never be lonely, for You are near.

You become my delicious feast even when my enemies dare to fight. You anoint me with the fragrance of your Holy Spirit; You give me all I can drink of You until my cup overflows.

So why would I fear the future? Only goodness and tender love pursue me all the days of my life. Then afterward, when my life is through, I'll return to Your glorious presence to be forever with You!...

Amen.