

Final Judgment

by John Piper

Psalm 23 teaches us about the personal experience of God's guidance and care, and the importance of staying close to God in all circumstances.

Duration: 33:48

Scripture: Psalm 23, Matthew 6:33, Hebrews 13:5-6, James 1:2

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Spiritual Restoration"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Psalm 23 and the different perspectives used to address God. The first three verses address God as 'he,' emphasizing his role as the shepherd who provides, restores, and leads. The following verses switch to 'you' or 'thou,' highlighting the personal relationship between the speaker and God. The speaker emphasizes the importance of not just speaking about God, but also speaking to God. The sermon also explores the imagery of the valley of the shadow of death, suggesting that sometimes God allows his sheep to face danger in order to lead them to better pastures. The speaker concludes by discussing the need for God's restoration when our spirits are broken and the importance of understanding our own needs in those times.

Transcript

Let's bow for a word of prayer together. We just want to say Amen, Father, to that, so that we all know that each other feel that prayer. We want you to live your life in it, and make your glory shine.

And to that end, I pray you will use your word tonight to spark greater faith and greater obedience in all of us. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen. I had planned to talk tonight about Psalm 23, and then next Sunday about Psalm 19.

But along about 3 o'clock yesterday, I realized that what I wanted to say from Psalm 23 was going to take 60 minutes or more. So I'm not going to preach it all tonight, but I'm going to talk about Psalm 23, Part 1 tonight. And then next Sunday, a sermon probably called The Shepherd and the Host, Psalm 23, Part 2. There's a version of Psalm 23 you've probably never heard before that I'd like to recite for you to start with.

It goes like this. Der Herr ist mein Hirte, mir wird nichts mangeln. Er weidet mich auf einer grünen Aue, er führt mich zum frischen Wasser.

Er führt mich auf rechter Straße um seines Namens willen. Und ob ich wanderte im finstern Tal, fürchte ich kein Unglück, denn du bist bei mir. Dein Stecken und Stab, sie trösten mich.

Du bereitest vor mir einen Tisch im Angesicht meiner Feinde. Du schenkest mir voll ein Gutes und Barmherzigkeit werden mir folgen mein Leben lang. Und ich werde bleiben im Hause des Herrn immer da.

The reason I know that hymn or psalm in German is because I can remember back in 1971 to 74 reciting that psalm to myself hundreds of times. As I rode my three-speed bike from Breisingstrasse in our little flat there to Ludwig Maximilians Universität along the Isar River. And as those months drew to a close of study in Germany in 1974 and the stress of my oral exams loomed in front of me, I said that psalm to myself again and again.

And I can remember riding in the evening through the English gardens there along the banks of the Isar saying to myself, He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. English and German.

And the reason I recited them to myself, these words, again and again and again, is because what I found was that this scripture, almost more than any other, seemed to become a reality just by saying it. The psalm itself became green pasture. The psalm itself became still waters.

The psalm itself restored the soul. I lived by it, I ate it, I drank it, and sure enough, it came true. In all the situations, the Lord was my shepherd and I did not want.

It's a very, very personal psalm, isn't it? There are no we's, no us's, no they's. Only my, me, I, he, you, or thou. It's an overflow of David's personal experience with God.

And one of the reasons I think we and all the history of the church has been drawn to this psalm is because we want desperately to feel that kind of authentic, personal experience that David describes. And when we hear a personal testimony about somebody that's been on the inside, we feel a little bit closer to it ourselves. And that's what we hear when we hear David say these things.

So in the spirit of the psalm, what I want to do is be personal and tell you what I've learned from this psalm in three steps. The things that have been shown to me as very significant. First of all, I've learned something from the form of this psalm.

The first three verses of Psalm 23 are addressed to God as he. The Lord is my shepherd. He makes me lie down.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness. Verses four and five switch over to you or thou.

I will not fear for you are with me. Your rod and staff comfort me. You prepare a table before me.

You anoint my head with oil. And then verse six switches back to the third person. I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Why? What can we learn from that in itself? This is what I take as a lesson. It is not good to speak long about God without speaking to God. Every Christian is at least an amateur theologian.

That is, somebody whose obligation it is to try to understand God's character and his ways and then put it into words. We're all amateur theologians. And if we aren't working that way, we're probably not saying anything of value to each other and not helping each other's faith.

Because faith comes by hearing about God and his ways and his character. But what I learned now from Psalm 23 is that I should interweave through my theology a lot of prayer. I should frequently interrupt my talking about God in order to talk to God.

Not far behind the theological sentence, God is generous, should come the prayerful sentence, thank you, God. And right on the heels of the theological sentence, God is glorious, should come the prayerful sentence, oh, how I adore your glory, oh, God. And what I've come to see is that this is the way it really must be if our hearts are feeling the reality of God and not just our minds are describing it.

So even from Psalm 23, the form of it, we are encouraged to experience God personally because we are led first into talking about God. He is my shepherd, makes me lie down in green pastures, he does this and that. And then we are drawn, whether we like it or not, into talking to God.

You will not leave me, you guide me through this valley. That's the first thing I learned from the form. The second thing I learned from the form is this.

I asked myself, why does David switch from he to you just at this point of verse four? Why didn't he just go on to say, for example, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, he is with me. His rod and his staff, they comfort me. That makes good sense, why not? Why switch here to the more intimate you or thou? I think the reason is a universal fact of our experience, isn't it? Namely, the crises of life draw us closer to God.

We are more prone to talk about God in the green pastures and more prone to cry out to God in the dark ravines of the valley of the shadow of death. We all know this is true. I have a friend, Jeff Van Vondren, who was in my Sunday school class, who used to say to me, I've never learned anything about trusting God from the easy times, only the hard times.

And you ask June Backland now what her experience has done for her relation to God. And what she'll tell you is that she's never been closer to God, at least if she tells you the same thing she told me. And I said to June, I said, why is it that we can't learn our own frailty and how precious God is before we get into a crisis situation? Because June's experience is universal.

We would all be saying the same thing she's saying if we were in her shoes. I think Jeff's comment is an overstatement. God does intend us to learn something from the green pastures and the still waters.

He wants us to learn thankfulness. I have a colleague over at Bethel, had a colleague, Bob Stein, who just moved from the college over to the seminary. And Bob used to shake his head when we had some faculty prayer meetings and say, why is God making my life so easy? I don't have anything to grumble about.

My kids are all healthy, they're all in school, they all know the Lord, I'm as healthy as I can be. My wife and I are happy together, I've got a great job here. Why? And then he would just stand back and he would say, God must be trying to teach me to be a good thinker.

And I've gotten good at it. He is a good thinker. And I think that's right.

Most of us in this room are in that category probably, although many of us have been through the valley recently and will go through again. But Jeff is right, isn't he? That almost all of our experience teaches us that when we go through the valleys of life, we do draw closer to God. It's the life and death experiences that cause us to turn theological sentences into cries to God for help.

And from this we can learn one other thing. We all know that there are dangers to faith in the valley. Many people are tempted to get angry at God and resent Him, and some reject Him because of suffering.

But there is just as great a danger in the green pastures, isn't there? Namely, the danger that we will love the grass and not the shepherd. The Bible warns about that. That's probably why they said it's hard for a rich man to get into the kingdom, because the rich man is very prone to fall in love with his riches.

When a sheep walks through dark valley with his shepherd, what does he do? He stays close. He doesn't let that knee get far away. You lose the knee, where are you going to go? You can't see where you're going.

You stay close in the darkness. In the green pastures, he's wandering all over the place. Stumble off into the side.

There are dangers in the green pastures and not just in the dark valleys, which is probably why James said, The second phrase from which I've learned a lot is the phrase, I shall not want. The second phrase in verse one. The Lord is my shepherd.

I shall not want. Now, for a long time, I misunderstood that phrase. I, being a shepherd, I have not understood the phrase, I shall not want.

I, being a good, ordinary American, took the word want to mean desire. That's what want means. I want a chocolate ice cream cone.

That means I desire one, right? So, I shall not want means I have no more desires, right? Well, the problem is that the word want is ambiguous, isn't it? In the Hebrew, praise God for the original languages, I discovered that the word doesn't have that ambiguity. You know that we say things like, he is not wanting. And what we mean is, he doesn't lack anything, right? That's the sense in which want is used in verse one of Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd, a more literal translation would be, I have no lack. Not no more desires. I knew that I had desires.

I got hungry. I desired my kids. I desired my wife.

I desired God. Desires aren't done away with when the shepherd comes. Well, that solved one problem, but it created another problem, didn't it? What do you mean, David, I have no lack? The Lord is my shepherd, I have no lack.

No lack of what? Well, that created a new problem. Do God's sheep lack nothing? We know from looking at the Psalm that that's not true. At least in one sense, it's not true.

All you have to do is read a little bit farther. You've got him in the pasture and by the still waters, but pretty soon, there he is going through the valley of the shadow of death. Now, I presume that when you're in the valley of the shadow of death, you lack life.

And you lack the green pastures and you lack the still waters. And there are dangers on all sides. There are some lacks, aren't there? So it can't mean lack nothing.

In fact, just plain old common sense would teach us that you can't have everything all at once. You've got to lack something when it's something else there. Blessings have to wait their turn, don't they? But that still left me with a little bit of a problem.

And I think the solution that I came up with is this, and see if you don't think this must have been David's intention. What he means is not that we lack the fulfillment of every single desire that pops into our heart, but that we lack nothing that the shepherd thinks is good for us. Wouldn't that be what he means when he says we have no lack? And I had that confirmed for me when I looked down at verse four and pondered it a little more.

The picture we have in verse four about the valley of the shadow of death is a situation of extreme danger in which the sheep's life is threatened on all sides. And he would be in danger of dying if the shepherd weren't there to protect and to guide with his rod and his staff. The rod for defense and the staff for guiding that poor dumb creature along.

But I asked myself, why is that sheep? Why would a sheep be in a valley so full of danger? Well, now one possible reason we could say the stupid animal has strayed. We have all gone astray. In other words, he sinned and got himself into this pickle.

I do not think that's what David has in mind here. The reason I don't is because we don't have a picture of a sheep straying into a thicket or into a cliff or into a dark valley and then being rescued out by a loving shepherd. What we have is a sheep walking through a valley and the shepherd going with him, leading him.

And we can see that if we look at the relationship between verses three and four. This was new, a new discovery that I got yesterday as I was pondering this. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake, even when I go through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me.

You see how closely those two statements are connected? In the King James I think it's, yea, though I go. That's an ambiguous word, that yea. It means also or even.

So that even the valley that you're walking through is one of those paths of righteousness which the Lord is leading you along. The Lord didn't stop leading the sheep when he got to the valley of the shadow of death. Which means he didn't get him there or he didn't come there because of sin.

So why did he come there? Why would a shepherd lead a poor, weak, vulnerable sheep into such a dangerous situation? And the only reason that I could think of that a shepherd might do that is to get somewhere better. Maybe you ran out of grass over here and the other pasture is over there. And in between there's this very dangerous valley that you have to go through.

I think the longest poem that I've ever written, I wrote in 1971 and it was called Cienega. And I wrote it as an overflow of joy that I had with Noel on a camping trip before the boys were born. In the San Bernardino Mountains when we were out at Fuller.

And I can remember planning this trip and getting in the car and driving up to these mountains. And then looking at these camping maps and knowing that it was supposed to be that way. So we turned onto this

dirt road and it went on and on.

And we started getting windy and narrow and bumpy. And we crossed two creeks. And I said, I look in that creek.

You've got to be kidding. I'm going to drive this Mustang through a creek. But it was real rocky so I drove it through.

And pretty soon we were going around these curves and you couldn't see around them. There was no turning back. It really got dangerous.

I was starting to feel really frightened. How would we ever get out of here? We were miles out of anybody's shouting distance. Why? Cienega.

That's why. There was a campground back there that we had heard was beautiful. And it was worth the trip.

We got back there and it opened up. And there was a stream and a pool and big green trees. And there had been a recent forest fire.

So the mountain was split right in half with black trees on this side and green trees on that side. I can remember crawling up there and getting black all over. Well, anyway, you write poems about things that have moved you deeply.

And that was an illustration to me as I look back yesterday of why in the world the Good Shepherd would leave sheep in dangerous valley. The answer is to get to Cienega. To get to new and better pastures.

And I think that's the way God works. Now, therefore, I learned from verse 4, this valley verse, that I indeed as God's sheep might have to lack many things. Didn't Jesus say the Son of Man has no place to lay his head? The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man lacks.

And if you want to follow Him, it's going to be that way. But, if I understand the meaning of verse 1, I have no lack. What he means is, I don't lack anything that the Shepherd thinks is good for me.

Doesn't Psalm 84.11 say, No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly. And doesn't Paul say in Philippians 4.19, My God will supply every need of yours in Christ Jesus. I leave in His hands what He considers to be.

The last phrase that I want to talk about, that has been really helpful to me, is the phrase, He restores my soul. That can mean two possible things. It can mean, the Hebrew word shul means to turn.

He turns my soul. It can either mean, turns it out of a path of sin to righteousness. That is, He corrects me.

He restores me to the path of righteousness. The other possibility is, turns it from dead lifelessness back to hope, joy, and refreshment. He refreshes my soul, which is the way I think most people usually read it.

But, not wanting to just let tradition determine what meaning I think David intended, I tried to poke around a little bit to see just how that verb was used elsewhere. I found this text in Lamentations, verse 16 of chapter 1, which says, My eye runs down with water because far from me is a comforter, one who restores my soul. You see, back to back with the word comforter, and the same phrase in Hebrew, one who

restores my soul.

And then I noticed that down in verse 4, David had said, Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. And that's the same word. So I said, well, probably then the tradition is right.

And this does, in fact, mean refresh. The Lord refreshes my soul. I think that's what it means.

Proverbs 18, 14 says this, A man's spirit will endure sickness. But a broken spirit, who can bear? I was walking out of the hospital the other day with Glenn out of the mental ward over there. And that text came to me, and I said to him, it's a world of difference to visit and minister to somebody whose body has been broken and whose spirit has been broken.

What can you do when the spirit has been broken? If the body's just been broken and the spirit is strong in the Lord, like June, you go in there and you get ministered to and they get ministered to. You go to somebody whose spirit has been broken, whose mind has snapped, and what can you do? The link, the link with life and power seems to be gone. The very will is broken.

But short of that, every one of us knows experiences in which the spirit is broken. Every one of us knows what it means when the soul just is deflated, like that beach ball that my boys play with when the air goes out of it, or like that little inner tube when they hang it up at home. It's just flat.

It's lifeless. It's dead. There's nothing in it.

You've got no motivation to even move. What do you do? Every one of us knows those times, and I think David did, and that's why he talked about God's restoration of soul. I've tried to analyze myself.

What is it that I need in those times? And I think I've narrowed it down to three things. First of all, I need in those moments of deflation and powerlessness and brokenness of spirit and depression, I need relief from the anxious cares that have made me feel hopeless. Sometimes the demands upon our time and the demands upon our mind, combined with repeated hindrances after hindrances to doing those demands, become so great they're like scraps around your head or around your soul that just squeeze all the life out and just leave you completely lethargic, with no motivation to do anything.

And what you need is for somebody to snap those tight bands of anxiety and pressure and pour in some cold, cool water of hope. That's one thing. I need relief from anxious cares.

The second thing I think I need, see if this doesn't ring true with you, I need to see some beauty. When I have an emptiness of spirit and a blankness of soul and no motivation, nothing is beautiful. And beauty is powerful.

I need to see some beauty. I'm not going to talk much about this now because in two weeks I want to talk about Psalm 19 and call it Sky Talk, where the heavens declare the glory of God. And I want to talk more about this concept of beauty in our life.

But I must say at least this. Every one of us in this room has felt the healing power of nature, haven't we? That's why you leave and go away on vacations and get away from the city with concrete all around. Nature seems to heal.

We've all sensed what I sensed that I referred to this morning. I finished up yesterday afternoon about 5.30 here and I'd had the curtains drawn all day. And I walked down and went outside and I just almost

exploded.

I hadn't seen the air like that for a long time. It's so lucid. Those apartments over there were just like they were right there.

And as I walked home I was just laughing. It was amazing. And I need very much to see beauty because beauty has that effect.

The sight of some stupendous beauty restores the soul. And the third thing I need is to feel the greatness of a power outside of me flowing into me. I think God created us to be conductors of a tremendous power flowing from himself like an electrical cord.

And if we don't have that power from outside of us flowing into us, invigorating us, nature won't get very far either. If we try to make nature our God like some of the romantic poets did, it will peter out on us. God is going to roll up the sky like a garment and cast it aside someday and show us what it stood for.

What it was a symbol of, the real thing in the new heaven. So until then, I think we need not only to behold the works of God in creation, but especially the word of God. Psalm 19, verse 7 says this, The instruction of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul.

Same phrase, Psalm 19, verse 7. The instruction of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul. Nothing, not even nature, can break those suffocating bands of anxiety off of my mind and soul like the promises of God. Neither Valium nor any other tranquilizer is half as good as hearing God say, Be content, Piper, with what you have, for I will never leave you nor forsake you.

So the writers of the Hebrews goes on and says, Hence, we can confidently say, the Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid, what can man do to me? Hebrews 13, 5 and 6. Don't, don't, you morons, don't turn to drugs to restore your soul. Turn to God and his works in creation and his words in the scriptures. Well, that's the beginning of what I've seen in Psalm 23.

I want to talk next week about the rest of these phrases in the psalm, but let me just sum up what we've seen tonight and then we'll close. I've learned from the form of the psalm that we shouldn't talk very long about God before we turn to talk to God. We ought to stir in a big hunk of prayer into the stew of our theology and our talk about God.

And the second thing I learned from the form of this psalm is that the crises of life, verse 4, draw us closer to God than do the green pastures. And there's danger in the green pastures, just like there are in the valley. Then that phrase, I shall not work.

What I've learned there is we got to trust God, not for every possible pleasure we can imagine, but that he will not deny us any good thing, anything that the shepherd thinks is good for the sheep. He may have to take us through a rocky valley, even the valley of the shadow of death. We are going to die if the Lord doesn't return.

And everybody in this room, there will be no escape. And that's going to be a valley that every one of us has to go through. But don't ever think that this psalm ceases to have application there because we're being denied something.

We're not. There's a pasture on the other side. There's Siena again.

And finally, he restores my soul. And from here, I've learned that every one of us gets into those frames of mind. Every one of us gets depressed and loses motivation and feels deflated and hopeless and anxious.

And we ought to remember that it's God to whom we turn first of all. God in nature and especially God in his word. It's the promises that lift those burdens better than anything else.

Let's pray together. Lord, it was a singular stroke of grace when you inspired David to write this psalm. Millions of people have comforted their hearts, both in the green pastures of bounty and in the dark valley of dying with this psalm.

It's been printed on funeral folder after funeral folder and read by those of us who skip and jump on our way home after a hassle. Thank you for it. What can we say but help us live in it and not distrust the promises that are here?

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/13/SID13748.mp3>
Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/final-judgment/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net