

Introduction



THE ATTACK

There is not a single need you could possibly have that isn't addressed by the words of Psalm 23.

Not one.

No matter what inadequacy or hardship you're facing and how deeply you're facing it, no matter how problematic or distressful or exacting it may be—if the Lord is your Shepherd, He can meet all of your needs. The Twenty-third Psalm was David's way of saying God is more than enough to meet whatever lack or constraint or extremity or impossibility you might ever encounter.

And that's why, although this immortal psalm is one of the most evocative and poetic passages ever written either inside the Bible or out, it is so much more than a

sweet-sounding set of verses to console your heart in tough times. It is magnificent and enrapturing as a literary masterpiece, yet its depth goes far beyond.

Beautiful as it is, this psalm is an *attack*.

It's an attack on our debilitating lack of trust in God and the great trauma of insecurity that's brought on by such doubts and disbelief. Most Christians do not actually believe that God is more than enough. Too often, God is the last one that we appeal to. And so we wind up becoming spiritually emaciated, unable to handle the ups and downs of life.

This profound psalm is an attack on our chronic inclination to look for fulfillment in all the wrong places. So many Christians are living lives of profound dissatisfaction. We go hungrily from one table to the next, experiencing one disappointment after another, and we're *just not satisfied*. We all discover, once we've lived long enough, that there's no friendship, no relationship, no ownership, no championship, no scholarship, no fellowship that can fully satisfy our wants. Psalm 23, however, offers us a vastly different approach to the question of satisfaction in life. At the heart of it we find what we could call, in popular terms, the secret to a happy life.

Furthermore, this psalm is an attack on our very serious sin of self-sufficiency—the stubborn independence that

makes us determined to deal with our own needs in our own way. Of all the sins a person can commit, at the top of the list is self-sufficiency, for it is fundamentally the sin of pride. It's thinking, *I can function independently of God; I'm all I need to take care of myself*. But what we're actually able to do for ourselves is utterly infinitesimal compared to what God can do for us, and that's why He designed us to live in utter dependence on Him. So the result of our foolish self-focus is that we narrow our existence to an uncomfortably restricted dimension.

Years ago I took my children on a certain attraction at Walt Disney World. As our floating vessel cruised along a winding stream, we were taken alongside elaborately staged representations of different cultures with different children dressed in different ways, all of them singing the same song in different languages: "It's a small world after all, it's a small world after all..."

The first time I heard the song, it was okay. The second time was tolerable. The third time, it started getting on my nerves. On the fourth time through I wanted to jump in the water and swim out of there! This small world, being endlessly sung about by small people, was becoming acutely irritating.

We're each of us so small, after all, and the world of our own resources is so pitifully insufficient. When you try living

within those confines it can only mean a cramped existence, and eventually you can't help wanting something more. You're like a plane circling in a holding pattern—every time you look down, the ground looks oh so familiar, and you want something else, somewhere new, something more. You can't help wanting to break out and see what's different and wider and better, to see life unfold as you believe it ought to, as you so deeply desire it to.

That's God's desire for you as well, and the kind of relationship with Him that Psalm 23 portrays is the pathway to get you there.

As we move, alertly and reflectively, through this tender psalm, you'll soon see that my driving message in this book is simple, not deep; you don't have to be a theologian or a Bible scholar or have a set of commentaries nearby to quickly understand where I'm headed. The good news of the Twenty-third Psalm boils down to one essential point: *If the Lord is your Shepherd, He will meet all your needs.* By allowing Him to freely do this for us, we can rest assured that whatever possible need arises, our Good Shepherd is sure to be there.

Chapter One



THE BASIC QUESTION

Just Who Is Your Shepherd?

Right there in the opening line of Psalm 23, we find the essence and climax and consummation of what the whole psalm is about: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

But immediately a problem reveals itself in our reaction to these well-known words from David. While everybody likes part two of the verse—naturally we want our wants and needs provided for—many of us would just as soon skip part one, the bothersome part about making the Lord our Shepherd.

So my simple question for you is this: I’m assuming the

Lord is your Savior, but is He also your Shepherd? In other words, do you want the promise of the second half of verse 1 bad enough to get the first half right?

I assure you that you'll be better prepared to answer that question after we take a closer look at each word in this brief opening phrase of this most famous psalm and we experience the deep and true encouragement to be found there.

"THE LORD..."

First of all, David identifies his Shepherd as "the Lord." What does David really mean by that name?

The Hebrew word for "Lord" in this verse is *Yahweh*. That's God's formal name, and it takes us back to Exodus 3, where God was leading Moses into a tough situation that was too big for him to handle. On that occasion, God revealed to Moses that His name is "I Am That I Am." That's *Yahweh*, the same "Lord" that David talks about.

What kind of name is this? If *Yahweh* the Lord is the one who meets all our needs, we really do need to know and understand His name.

"I Am That I Am" conveys first of all God's *self-existence*. He's the eternally existent One. God exists because God exists. He isn't defined by anything outside Himself.

His existence is wrapped up in His existence; the total circumference of who God is within God Himself.

Therefore God is also *self-sufficient*. He depends on nothing outside Himself in order to be God. He is sustained by Himself, which means He is of necessity consistent with Himself.

When I'm cold, I need a coat. When I'm hungry, I need food. When I'm sick, I need a doctor. I have to go outside myself to have my needs met. But not God, because all that He requires, He is. What this means practically is that God has what no one in all creation has: an eternally unchangeable nature. God will always be as He is now and as He reveals Himself to be, because "I Am That I Am." God is the same yesterday and today and tomorrow. His essential nature does not change because it *cannot* change, because it's defined by His own internal reality that needs nothing outside Himself.

You and I, on the other hand, live in an atmosphere of constant change. The weather changes, our health changes, our mood changes, our level of knowledge changes. We constantly fluctuate and oscillate and deviate as we find ourselves in varying circumstances.

But God never changes. What He was, He is. What He is, He will always be.

That means God is the most consistent thing in your

life. The most dependable thing you have going for you is not your family or your friends or your bank account or your life's work. The best and the most consistent thing you have going for you is your God, and we see that even in His name. "I Am That I Am," He says. There is constancy with God.

*When you're in
trouble, where do
you go first?*

When it came to meeting his needs and overcoming his struggles in life, David knew he needed someone consistent and steadfast to lean on. He didn't want a Shepherd who would only be there sometimes. He needed a Shepherd he could bank on 24/7. And only the Lord God can be that.

And because of who He is, God already possesses all that it takes to fully satisfy us. All the raw materials necessary to address our deepest needs are already built into His identity. He doesn't have to go look for it or buy it or borrow it. He *has* it, because I Am That I Am. He's a one-stop shop.

So you want to make sure your Shepherd is not some cheap god, but the unchanging Yahweh, the Lord, the only God. The Bible is His résumé, and it's a thick one. He's got all the qualifications, all the capacity required to handle the job. He's managing the lives of billions of people all at the

same time. And while He's taking care of that, He keeps the earth's rivers flowing and the breezes blowing and the fields and the flowers and the trees all growing. Meanwhile, He keeps our planet rotating on its axis and revolving around the sun, even as he manages the affairs of stars and galaxies that only He can ever know the number of.

That's why David tells the Lord, "*You* are my shepherd; I'm looking only to *You*."

Is the Lord your Shepherd, too? It's easy to answer yes, but how do you know if it's something real for you or if you're just saying the words?

Let me give you a simple test. When you're challenged or tested or stretched, when you need help, where do you go first? Where do you look? Who do you turn to first? Most folks go to God only after they've tried everything else—when nothing else is working, *then* they try praying.

Think about your last crisis. Whatever or whoever you went to first for help in that crisis, *that* is your shepherd.

A man on a trip into the African rainforest was following a guide. As they pushed onward into deeper and darker jungle, the guide with his machete was whacking away at the thick green growth that rose like a wall everywhere before them.

"How do you know where to go?" the man asked.
"Where's the path?"

The guide replied, "*I am* the path."
 It's a jungle out there, and we need a guide who knows where he's going and what he's doing. God is that guide, because He is the great I Am.

"...Is..."

David didn't say, "The Lord *was* my shepherd." He didn't say, "The Lord *will be* my shepherd." He said, "The Lord *is* my shepherd." Right now. In this very moment. It's a present-tense relationship, which it must be, since God's name is I Am, and that name also reveals His *eternal* nature.

When God says, "I Am That I Am," He's saying, "I am always in the present tense." Everything for God is *now*. God has never experienced a yesterday. Nor does He have a tomorrow, so God never has to use the words *I hope...*

Why is it important to know this about God? Because when I have a need, my need is in the *now*. When I have a struggle, my struggle is in the *now*. When I have a hurt, my hurt is in the *now*. And God tells us, "I am the Eternal Now. I can meet you in your present experience."

Then there are those of us that are worried and upset and even popping pills because we're thinking about *tomorrow*. But God shepherds us one day at a time—He makes sure we have enough grace to cover the troubles of *today*.