

MEDITATION 1: **Does God Really Provide Everything I Need?**

Psalm 23:1

The psalms give us a picture of what it looks like when we live in the kingdom of God here and now every day. That overflowing life exists not only in the future, but also now: “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). Such a life of connecting with God moves us toward becoming people who live with joy and gratefulness, being able to bless enemies (difficult people), going the extra mile, living with purposeful intentionality, letting go of pride, and never judging.¹ This is the life humans were meant to live. In one of Jesus’ many “shepherd moments,” he said: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:30-32). This life in the kingdom of God is a life of confidence in God.

1) Opening To God’s Message

Find a comfortable, pleasant spot to settle that will not present distractions to you.

Why are you taking this retreat? What do you most need from God in your life right now? Or, what do you most need to understand from God right now?

{Insert 3 lines.}

At what moments in life are you convinced you don’t have everything that you need? Give a few lighthearted answers (when I see a new car or purse or vacation out of my price range) and a few serious answers (job has ended; precisely-needed medication not affordable). Answer as honestly as you can.

{Insert 5 lines.}

2) Immersed In God’s Message

BACKGROUND Confidence psalms: While many psalms are thanksgiving psalms composed after being delivered from a crisis, confidence psalms “are more distanced from the

crisis and reflective. They speak generically of a relationship with Yahweh that is utterly trustworthy in the face of *every* threat. . . . The speaker of these poems cannot imagine a situation that would cause doubt or trouble enough to jeopardize the trust. The relationship has been tested severely, and Yahweh has shown himself to be profoundly reliable and powerful. That is to be celebrated.”² In confidence psalms, psalmists take what God says and make it their own from the depths of themselves.

To quiet yourself and focus before reading the passage, say this slowly. or Be still?

“In our meditation
we ponder the chosen text
on the strength of the promise
that it has something utterly personal to say to us today
and for our Christian life.”³

Read this passage aloud *very slowly*. You will be tempted to rush through it.

The LORD is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

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.

""For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

**As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them,
so will I look after my sheep.**

**I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds
and darkness.**

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.

(Psalm 23:1-4, KJV; Ezekiel 34:11-12, NIV; Psalm 23:1 GNB)

Before reading it again, consider:

CONTEXT: God as shepherd is a familiar image in Scripture (Psalm 79:13, 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 23:3, 4). The shepherd image is also used by and applied to Jesus, which is why it is appropriate to transfer the meaning of Psalm 23 to Jesus as well (John 10:11, 14, 27-30; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25, 5:4; Revelation 7:17).

BACKGROUND: Picture the work of a shepherd as you read this psalm.

- Protector of sheep: The shepherd defends the sheep from wild dogs, cougars and rustlers.

A shepherd also protects the sheep from the environment by providing shelter from storms and blizzards.
- Provider of food and clean water (instead of stagnant, muddy water): The shepherd manages the food supply by leading sheep where they will find adequate pasture instead of leaving them in bare brown fields.
- Doctor: The shepherd tends the wounds and diseases of the sheep and has to keep constantly alert to spot their injuries.

- Disciplinarian: The shepherd monitors fights among the sheep and protects smaller or wounded ones.
- Rescuer: When sheep get lost or wander into dangerous places, the shepherd must search relentlessly. That may involve climbing down into crevices or coming close to poisonous snakes in order to rescue the sheep.
- Companion: The shepherd walks with and among the sheep and knows them by name.
The sheep of different shepherds can be kept in the same pen because when a shepherd come to the pen and calls for his or her sheep, only that shepherd's sheep will come.
- Delighted manager: Speaking of God as a shepherd, shepherd Philip Keller writes: "For Him there is no greater reward, no deeper satisfaction, than that of seeing His sheep contented, well fed, safe and flourishing under His care. This is indeed His very 'life.' He lays Himself out for those who are His."⁴

A shepherd who is gentle, kind, intelligent, brave and selfless (as God is) is much preferred to a careless, selfish one that would cause the sheep to struggle, starve and suffer hardship.

MEANINGS OF WORDS *I shall not want* is also well translated "I have everything I need." Try saying aloud slowly, "I . . . have . . . everything . . . I . . . need." How many people do you know who would say that and mean it? This is a radical statement in a culture that is flooded with advertising—an industry whose primary goal is to convince you that you *don't* have everything you need. The Israelites would have felt lack many times yet "Israel refuses to split things into spiritual and material. It affirms that Yahweh is the satisfaction of all wants and needs . . . of every kind of need."⁵

Here are some other paraphrases:

- I am completely satisfied with God's management of my life.
- I can't think of anything God could give me that would make me more content.
- I don't need a thing.

This statement, *I have everything that I need*, brings up issues that will not resolved in this session:

- Do I believe God has done well by me? (Meditations 4-6 especially)
- What do I believe about the times in my life that have been difficult?
- Have I perhaps struck an unspoken bargain with God that I'll believe and follow but I expect my life not to include difficult times?

Most people find these questions challenging. This psalm presents a radical picture of what it looks like to trust God. If you don't feel authentic saying, "The Lord is my shepherd and I have everything I need," feel free to add *maybe* or *sometimes* at the beginning or end. That's a realistic way to aim toward an attitude of complete trust.

As you read the passage, consider what word or phrase stands out to you or resonates with you.

- Waiting for a word to stand out is not a spooky or magical thing. This is a natural thing that probably already happens to you when you read the Bible—you think: *How come I never saw that word or phrase or idea before?* Actually, you did see it before, but now you see it in a new and different way. It now stands out to you.
- Don't feel pressured to make something up. If nothing stands out, quiet yourself, read the quieting exercise ("In our meditation we ponder the chosen text . . ." and read the passage again.

- Don't use self-directed effort to try to *apply* the passage to yourself. When you attempt to apply a passage, you try to figure out what you should do to implement what you read. At this point, simply *let God bring to you* what you need to know. Let it be God's effort, not your own.
- Be open to let God speak to you. Expect to be surprised.

Now reread the passage again *slowly* aloud.

The LORD is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

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.

"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them,

so will I look after my sheep.

I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds

and darkness.

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.

(Psalm 23:1-4, KJV; Ezekiel 34:11-12, NIV; Psalm 23:1 GNB)

Write down the word or phrase or idea that stands out to you.

{Insert 3 lines.}

What feelings did you get in these verses?

{Insert 6 lines.}

What thoughts or impressions come to you? What connections do you make? What questions or perhaps objections do you have? Does anything surprise you?

{Insert 3 lines.}

What might God be saying to you through what has stood out in this passage? Is there a place in your life where you really need to know what comes to you from the passage? (Again, don't try to make something up or try to apply it to yourself. Let it come to you.) Take a few minutes to do this. If your mind begins to drift, come back to the word or phrase that stood out to you.

{Insert 10 lines.}

3) Responding To God's Message

Read the passage again to yourself and consider how it leads you to dialogue with God.
(Or if you wish, read the entire passage again.)

The LORD is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

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(Psalm 23:1-4, KJV; Ezekiel 34:11-12, NIV; Psalm 23:1 GNB)

Say to God what you most need to say. It will help if you write your prayer below or say it aloud. This will make it more concrete and relational. Be open to having a dialogue with God, to being gently led by the Holy Spirit.

- You may want to begin with “Dear God” or “Dear Jesus” and then say what you need to say in response to what God has said in this passage to you. If you’re not sure, here are some possibilities:
- Begin with, “I’m so glad that you said . . .” or “I really needed to hear that you . . .”
- Feel free to say things that don’t sound spiritual (such as, What if I don’t really believe that . . . ?) Then move on with more you need to say.
- Say what you don’t understand.

- Ask God questions and mark them because you may find them answered by the end of today or tomorrow.
- Never feel pressed to write pages and pages. One sentence might really be enough, or you may need to write more.

{Insert 10 lines.}

4) Resting With God in the Message

Read the passage (or the portion that stood out to you) again to yourself one more time.

The LORD is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

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.

"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them,

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I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds

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The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.

(Psalm 23:1-4, KJV; Ezekiel 34:11-12, NIV; Psalm 23:1 GNB)

As you've read the passage several times, how have you experienced God? What was God like? Reflect on how God seemed to you. Did you have a sense that you're only talking to yourself or that God was present? Did God seem distant or attentive? Caring or frustrated? Demanding or inviting? Talk to God about this.

{Insert 3 lines.}

Allow yourself time to soak in what has come to you—questions, new ideas or clarifications about God or yourself. Let it sink all the way down to where you really live. Sit for a few moments and ponder what has transpired. You may wish to:

- Sit and just “be” with God (Be still, and know that God is God.)
- Appreciate or celebrate what occurred in your conversation with God;
- Worship God by singing a song related to Psalm 23 (or even dancing to it). If you brought a recording of a Psalm 23 song, play it now. Close your eyes and listen.
- Rest in the idea that God delights in you and in taking care of you.

Close this interaction with this prayer:

May today there be peace within.

May I trust you, God, that you can work in me exactly where I am.

May I not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May I use those gifts that I have received, and pass on the love that has been given to me.

May I be content knowing I am your child. Let your presence settle into my bones, and
allow my soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love.

--Thérèse of Lisieux, paraphrased

Move into a time of enjoying the life and breath God gave you. You may want to:

- take a nap
- take a walk or a hike or swim or do relaxing exercises
- try “porch sitting,” watching birds and trees or sitting in a Jacuzzi.
- do a creative activity (using art materials, woodworking, needlework, beadwork), but don’t try to accomplish anything
- light, meditative reading (not a detective novel or something that will engage you wholly).

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¹ This is a summary of the sermon on the Mount.

² Walter Brueggeman *The Message of the Psalms A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), 152, *italics mine*.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954), 82.

⁴ Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* Large Print Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 31.

⁵ Walter Brueggeman *The Message of the Psalms A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), 155.