

The sermon

Intro

God's love. What does this mean?

I got saved in 1999. As a new Christian, my experience with popular, contemporary evangelical Christianity (worship songs, Christian music on the radio, popular authors, evangelism methods, etc.) gave me the impression that God's love is the single greatest doctrine, single greatest attribute of God in the Bible. Virtually every song, every sermon emphasized God's love. Little to nothing about God's judgment. Little to nothing about God's holiness. We ought to talk about God's love all the time. We ought to downplay the other less "uplifting" truths.

Interestingly, contemporary evangelicalism shoved God's love down my throat over and over again, but they did little to fill out what God's love actually means. Sure Jesus died for me. Some told the story of the prodigal son. But not much further. There was never any effort to carefully define what God's love actually is. More assumed than explained with Scripture.

Outside of Christian culture, the world had its own views of God's love. A loving God would never send anyone to hell. A loving God accepts all people. Everyone will be welcomed into God's heaven. All religions included. God doesn't judge people for their sexual behavior. God loves all. On the other hand, if God is in control and people suffer, then God can't be loving some say.

While the world fails to understand that God's love stands alongside God's holiness and God's wrath and God's sovereignty in perfect harmony, the church, at least in some of my experience, failed to help Christians see what God's love means for them in everyday life.

If you want to know what God's love means for you today, Psalm 23 is a great place to look. The word love isn't in the ESV translation, but it's there.

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

Four points on God's love for his sheep. What's true for David is true for everyone who knows the good shepherd Jesus Christ.

Point 1: God loves by giving peace (23:1-2)

A PSALM OF DAVID.

David testifies to the various ways God loves him.

The LORD is my shepherd;

David illustrates God's love with shepherd imagery.

Sheep

Let me tell you about sheep. In the New Testament, Jesus' sheep are those who believe (John 10:11, 14-16, 25-29). Christian, one way you should self-identify is sheep. Not that I'm a sheep trapped in a human body. Rather, spiritually speaking, we're like sheep.

Sheep are dumb animals. They won't go where they're supposed to go. They need to be led. They're easily spooked and will run off a cliff. They'll run into a river and drown themselves. They're fearful animals. At times they won't move. Often because of fear. They're also very stubborn. Won't receive help. They're also helpless at times. A sheep with too much fur can fall on their back and be unable to get up.

As a pastor/elder, I'm both sheep and shepherd. Just like you I'm dumb, fearful, stubborn. I need to be led.

"my shepherd"

Note God is David's shepherd. In order to experience the things David speaks about, God must be our shepherd personally, individually. A person doesn't become Jesus' sheep because they have a Christian parent or have a Christian friend or even because they attend a Christian church. Jesus isn't the generic shepherd of all people.

Jesus is the shepherd of all who believe. If you believe, you are Jesus' sheep.

Christian, God is your shepherd. You're under his care. You're the object of his steadfast love.

I shall not want.

This isn't limited to the future. David isn't lacking today because of who his shepherd is. The LORD gives David everything he needs.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. – 23:2

David begins to discuss what God's steadfast love looks like in action. God leads his sheep to the right place.

"green pastures...still waters"

Sheep need both food and water to survive. A good shepherd will find both.

"green pastures" = means the grass is green. The grass is new, fresh, and there's a lot of it. No lack. Plenty to eat today. Plenty tomorrow.

Note also God makes his sheep ***"lie down."*** They can rest and sleep because nothing to fear. A place free from predators.

"still waters" = water for drinking, cleaning, and healing wounds, but more than that. Waters that are still, restful, not chaotic. No explosive waves. No loud boats rippling the water. No kids splashing you with cannonballs. Still, restful, peaceful waters.

A place of plenty. A place of rest. A place of peace. God provides for our physical needs. God gives our soul rest.

Application

God's sheep can lie down without fear because God is with us, protecting us from predators. God is present to provide peace! I should expect peace, because God is leading my way.

Christian, God loves you by bringing you to restful, still places.

Practical question: how is God moving my heart to a place of peace?

Point 2: God loves by giving purity (23:3)

He restores my soul.

David concedes there's something off in his soul. His inner being. His heart.

The human heart can go astray in numerous ways. We can be angry, upset about everything, easily annoyed, a firecracker waiting to explode or act like everything's a joke, failing to take seriously what ought to concern us. We can be over-confident/prideful or paralyzed by fear, despair, worthlessness. We can be ruled/mastered/controlled by possessions/substances/entertainment or unaffected, apathetic, unfeeling, having zero enjoyment in life, zero passion for anything.

David's soul can go in the wrong direction, so he needs internal restoration. God brings David's soul back to where it ought to be.

Whether we're "*beside still waters*" or walking "*through the valley of the shadow of death*," God brings our heart back to where it ought to be by his indwelling, Holy Spirit. God works inside us when circumstances are good, when circumstances are awful.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

A theme's emerging: God leads his people.

God leads his sheep "*in paths of righteousness*." Paths that are morally right, just, pure. Behavior that conforms to God's word. Meaning God's leading us in the direction of sanctification (spiritual progress). God directs our paths to get sin out of our lives and replace it with righteousness. God's wisely working all things for our good (Rom 8:28). Nothing's random. No chance. No mistakes.

Why? "*for his name's sake*." God cares about his reputation. God wants us to behave in ways that make him look good.

Application

Question. **Why is it that when God cares about his reputation it's praiseworthy for him, but it's not praiseworthy for us to seek a name/reputation for ourselves?** Good question.

It comes down to the Creator-creature distinction. God is a different sort of being than us. God's on a different level. A higher level. God's perfect and flawless. We're not. God's always praiseworthy. We fall short. It's right for God to say, "Praise me." It's wrong for us to say, "Praise me." Because of who he is. Because of who we are. And because we were made to see and behold and know and understand and celebrate God in all his perfections. God doesn't exist to praise us. We exist to praise God.

On the other hand, there's nothing wrong with wanting a good name/reputation. God encourages us to desire a good name: "*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold*" (Proverbs 22:1). It's better to be thought well of than have a lot of money and stuff.

But not so we can boast and brag and be worshipped and feel superior. Rather, so that people will look at our lives and say this person really does life well and they have faith in Jesus and they believe the Bible is 100% true. Is there a connection? Maybe I should consider learning about their God? We want people to see what God's done in us so they'll celebrate God too! Humility says I don't want to draw attention to myself. Humility says I want to draw attention to God.

On the other hand, what's good for God's reputation is good for us. Our lives prosper when we sin less and righteousness increases. We protect ourselves from a bad reputation. We protect ourselves from self-inflicted consequences.

Christian, God loves you by guiding you into practical righteousness. God is present to provoke purity.

Practical question: how is God moving me towards practical righteousness?

Point 3: God loves by giving protection (23:4)

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. – 23:4

There's peace when predators are nowhere to be found. And there's peace when my life's in danger.

God leads us into safe, still places. God leads us into dangerous places too.

“the valley of the shadow of death”

It's dark, you're on the low ground, and there's robbers and dangerous animals above and behind rocks and they're hidden from your sight. You're vulnerable and you'll never see the attacker coming. Your safety's compromised. There's every reason to fear. But you don't. Because your shepherd is present to protect you.

What about the rod and the staff?

The **“rod”** and **“staff”** were used for counting sheep, caring for sheep (knocking down food from trees), correcting sheep (like spanking), and striking dangerous animals.

The sheep feel safe because their shepherd is present to protect.

Application

Likewise, whatever your dark valley is, you should feel safe under the watchful care of our God. Maybe you're experiencing health decline. Maybe you find yourself around an unstable loved one, neighbor, or co-worker. Maybe you do work that puts you in danger at times (heights, dangerous machinery, radiation). God is present to protect!

This doesn't have to be limited to the dark side of town in Washington D.C. or Louisville. This relates to simple fears like fear of flying or the teenager who's afraid to drive. God is present to protect!

As for David, his life was frequently in danger. Whether Goliath, battles with the Philistines, hunted by Saul, etc. He's saying I feel safe wherever I go. Because God is present to protect!

This isn't an excuse for foolish behavior. I'll drive 100 mph around the corner because God will protect me. This doesn't mean believers can't die at a young age. Putting Scripture together (Rom 8:35, 39), God protects and preserves our life from danger so long as he wills us to remain alive. When it's our appointed time to die, God brings us into his presence. So long as it isn't our appointed time, God preserves us in the deadly valley.

Christian, you should walk through life by faith: with full confidence that God is present to protect.

Practical question: do I feel safe wherever I go because God is present to protect?

Point 4: God loves by giving provision (23:5-6)

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. – 23:5

The picture shifts from shepherds and sheep to hospitality.

This is a fascinating picture: invited to a meal (feasting on food and drink) with his enemies looking on. He can feast freely and fully without fear because his enemies are zero danger. His enemies aren't a threat because the host, God, is present. In the presence of real foes (Goliath, Philistines, Saul, etc.), God provides for David's physical nourishment abundantly. God is present to protect. God is present to provide.

Scented oil was given for refreshment. Think perfume. Think a sweaty guest sprayed down with AXE body spray or given some Old Spice. Ladies think being given some Bath & Body Works lotions and mists.

"my cup overflows" = drink, and not a stingy amount. Being fed to the full.

Enemies are lurking, but we can eat to the full in peace because God is present.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.
– 23:6

"mercy" is the word ESV elsewhere translates "steadfast love." They've chosen to stick with the King James here likely because it's familiar to many. Other translations translate **"mercy"** "loyal love" (NET), "faithful love" (CSB), "lovingkindness" (NASB), "love" (NIV). God's love follows us wherever we go, every day of our life. Christian, there is never a time in your life that God's steadfast love isn't present with you!

God's steadfast love is God's enduring commitment to us that causes him to act for us and in us.

God is present. God acts for us and in us. Peace, purity, protection, provision.

With steadfast love think marriage. Marriage is a "till death do us part" commitment. Enduring commitment. Day after day, year after year. And we don't just make a commitment to remain married and live in the same house. We commit to love and cherish our spouse. To act for them over and over again.

So it is with God. He pledges himself to us for the long haul. So he keeps acting for us. God's steadfast love:

- 1) Leads us to green pastures where we can feast.
- 2) Leads us to safe places where we can lie down.
- 3) Leads us to still waters where we can rest.
- 4) Moves our heart in the right direction (**"He restores my soul"**).
- 5) Leads us into righteousness = changes our hearts and behavior.
- 6) Protects us when danger lurks so we need not fear.
- 7) Feeds us to the full while enemies lurk all around.
- 8) Cleans up our filth and stench with oil.

Christian, God's steadfast love is with you wherever you go.

Practical question: how does the always present and active love of God comfort my soul?

Conclusion

If you don't know God, what David's talking about doesn't apply to you. David's experience isn't your experience.

Psalm 103:17 says, *"But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him."*

My point? Only those who fear God (reverence, respect, awe) have God as their shepherd. Only those who fear God have God's steadfast love following them every day of their life. Only those who fear God **"shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever"** = will be welcomed into the new heavens and new earth.

How does a person move from God isn't my shepherd to God is my shepherd? How can David's experience be your experience? Through faith and repentance.

Brandon read earlier from **John 10:14-16**, where Jesus said:

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

Jesus laid down his life for the sheep on the cross. As a substitute, taking their penalty, their punishment, on himself. So that they would experience eternal life, forgiveness of sins, a new heart.

Do you know Jesus? Do you listen to his voice? If so, you are his sheep. And everything said in Psalm 23 is true for you!

Are you unsure? Talk to me. Talk to the person next to you. Ask questions. I can assure you this. If you believe in Jesus, everything he promised to those who believe is true for you. If you believe in Jesus, he's restoring your soul and changing your heart.

How can I know I'm Jesus' sheep? Do I believe? Is God restoring my soul?