

# He Restores My Soul

*Psalm 23*

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Week 4 · College Park Church · Summer 2026

## INTRODUCTION

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One of the remarkable things about having children is that when they go to someone else's house, those new toys are always far more exciting than the ones at home — even if they're the exact same toys. The adult version of this is when somebody comes to visit you in your hometown. You've taken everything for granted — the history, the restaurants, the tourist spots — and then they arrive and you begin to see things through their eyes. Hopefully you find a renewed appreciation for what was always there.

The 23rd Psalm is probably familiar to many of us, and that's not a bad thing. These are words of great love and great comfort. They should walk with us through green pastures and dark valleys alike. But because it is so familiar, it can be easy to recite without stopping to look. This psalm is not simply a list of comforting truths. From beginning to end it is a journey — the shepherd leading through places that feed and refresh, through the valley of the shadow of death, and finally to a feast that never ends. It is the journey of life, in all its seasons, led by the Good Shepherd.

## LOST

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Before we arrive at "The Lord is my shepherd," we have to be honest about where our story actually begins — in lostness.

Last fall, I rebuilt one section of fence four different times. The horses kept getting out. Fresh water, good grass, hay, a mineral block, safety — everything they needed. And every

time they looked over that fence and decided the grass was greener on the other side. That's not just the story of rebellious horses. That's the story of all of us.

*"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned — every one — to his own way."*

Isaiah 53:6

Sin is the fountain from which every other drain flows. It leads us to grief — the loss of life, relationships, everything in between. It brings fear, whether from the consequences of our own sin or the sin of others against us. It produces exhaustion — different from tiredness, which God designed us to feel at the end of a good day. Before the fall, work was difficult but good. Now it is toil, opposed, sometimes feeling like the same thing over and over with nothing changing. Sin breaks relationships and produces loneliness. And it produces shame — not just guilt, which shows us what we did, but shame, which tells us that sin is a part of who we are.

*"For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."*

Romans 8:22–23

Part of the problem is that we're in remarkable denial about all of this. We're convinced we're fine even in the midst of shame and fear and grief and broken relationships. We're like the knight in Monty Python — "'Tis but a flesh wound" — convinced that despite every wound and every bit of broken progress, we are doing just fine and can handle it ourselves.

But do you know what the first question God asks in Scripture is? Not the first question asked — the first question God asks.

*"Where are you?"*

Genesis 3:9

God knows exactly where Adam is. He's not searching. He's calling — come out of hiding, come into the light. The first question in all of Scripture is God entering the darkness to find the lost. And that thread runs all the way through.

*"The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light; for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned."*

Isaiah 9:2 (quoted in Matthew 4:16)

The light isn't advice for people in darkness. It isn't a program or a path. It's a person, stepping into the dark, coming close, coming to find. The shepherd does not wait for the sheep to find its way home. He comes.

## FOUND

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*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."*

Psalms 23:1

Not a wish. Not a prayer. A confession of present reality. Before the green pastures, before the valley — the relationship is named, and everything that follows lives inside it.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables. We tend to jump to the third — the prodigal son — but look at the first.

*"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."*

Luke 15:4–5

Consider the wonder of this. A hundred sheep, one is lost — that's 1% loss. In any economy, that's the cost of doing business. You absorb it and move on. But the shepherd doesn't see that sheep as insignificant. He leaves the ninety-nine and goes — actively, searching until he finds. And when he finds it, he doesn't walk it home with a lecture. He lays it on his shoulders. Rejoicing.

Years ago our dog Dodger had a habit — on Sunday mornings, if the front door opened, he was gone. Fifteen minutes before church, I'm running down Princeton chasing this white dog. When I finally caught him, I wasn't carrying him home on my shoulders. I grabbed him by the collar. "You doofus. I have things to do." That's our instinct. That's not our shepherd.

Everything in verses 2 and 3 is received, nothing is achieved. He makes me lie down. He leads me. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness. The sheep's only role is to be tended. Sheep can only truly rest when the shepherd has addressed every threat — predators, conflict within the flock, hunger, pests. The rest in verse 2 is the answer to everything named in the wasteland of lostness. And all of it flows from the shepherd's character: for his name's sake. Not our accomplishments. Who he is.

"I shall not want" is not the psalmist talking himself into contentment. It is David saying that everything he has needed and desired has been provided by the one who watches over him. That name — the covenant name, Yahweh — is the green pastures, is the still waters, is the restored soul, is the wonderful future. The name is not just the reason for the care. The name is the substance of it.

## THROUGH

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*"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."*

Psalm 23:4

We use "even though" to describe difficulty in the midst of something otherwise good. The flight went well — even though it was delayed. Friday night went well — even though it rained. Even though assumes a before and an after. The valley is not the destination.

We who have been found — rescued from the wasteland, clothed in the righteousness of Christ — will still walk through valleys in this life. Death is the clearest example. Sin has been defeated, but its aftershocks still move through the world. Grief still comes. Fear still comes. Jesus said plainly: "In this world you will have trouble." Not might. Will.

The promise is not escape from the valley. The promise is presence through it.

Notice what happens to the language in verse 4. In verses 2 and 3, David speaks about the shepherd — he leads, he restores, he provides. The moment the valley appears, the language shifts to direct address: you are with me, your rod, your staff. When the terrain gets hard, the relationship gets closer. The darkness drives us from description into conversation. That's where the deepest trust is formed.

The rod and staff are working tools, not decorative. The rod for protection, the staff for guiding and pulling back from the edge. The shepherd enters the valley armed and present. Comfort here isn't a feeling — it's the presence of someone equipped for exactly this terrain.

The temptation in the valley is always to figure it out ourselves, on our own terms and timetable. Consider Israel at the Red Sea in Exodus 14 — the sea ahead, mountains on the sides, Pharaoh's army behind. And God's word through Moses is: "Stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord." Every instinct screaming to move, to run, to fight. And the word is: stand still.

Then Moses stretches out his staff. The sea parts. And it's still not easy — do you want to walk between two walls of water? Through a literal valley, into the unknown. But the shepherd leads. Step by step. Sometimes the shepherd's word is stand still. Sometimes it's follow me through the walls of water. But it is never: figure it out yourself. Never: you're on your own.

We are not alone. We are not unprotected. And the valley is not the end of the path.

## FOREVER

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*"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*

Psalm 23:5–6

It is easy to rush through these last two verses — especially when we've memorized the psalm. We slow down for the pastures, we slow down for the valley, and then the final verses come and we recite them quickly. But there is wonder here. Slow down.

Wonder in the Battle. The enemies haven't left. This isn't a scene after the conflict resolves — the threat is still visible. And into that tension the shepherd sets a table. Not an energy bar on the run. Not a protein bar grabbed on the way out the door. The table is prepared — cloth, cutlery, courses served one by one. One commentator pictures it on an elevated position, beautifully appointed, enemies surrounding below, unable to do anything. God's provision doesn't wait for danger to pass. It feasts in the middle of it. And there is a Christ-ward reading here: on the night he was betrayed, Jesus sat at a table in the presence of his enemy, Judas across from him. The Good Shepherd who prepares the table for his sheep first sat at his own table with his betrayer present.

Wonder in the Hospitality. The Hebrew word for anoint here is *dishanta* — from the root *dāshan*, meaning to make rich, to saturate, to refresh. Not the ceremonial word for anointing a king. The shepherd's word. Shepherds applied oil daily — to prevent pests and parasites, to soothe wounds, to protect. When we work with the horses in summer, it's fly spray every time. The shepherd would find the spots that hurt and tend them. But it's also the picture of hospitality — a host who receives an honored guest applies oil generously, refreshing and welcoming. The sheep are the guests of honor at this table.

And the cup — not poured to the brim, but overflowing. Spurgeon says: "How would it be with you if God had filled your cup in proportion to your faith? How much would you have had?" The cup overflows not because our faith is great but because the shepherd is generous. But the deepest thing about the cup is what it cost. In Scripture there is another cup — the cup of God's wrath, which Psalm 75 says will be drained to the dregs. That is the cup Jesus asked his Father to remove in the garden. It wasn't removed. He drank it completely, so that those who trust in him receive not the cup of wrath but the cup of overflowing mercy. Our cup overflows precisely because his was drained.

Wonder in the Pursuit. Stop at the word "follow." The Hebrew is radaph — used 144 times in the Old Testament, almost always translated chase, hunt down, pursue. It's the word for Pharaoh's armies at the Red Sea. It's the word for Saul hunting David through the wilderness. And here, in what appears to be the only place in the Old Testament where it is used positively, it is goodness and mercy doing the chasing. David knew what it was to be hunted. And he says: in my life, God has hunted me with goodness the same way Saul hunted me with hatred.

*Chad Bird writes: "The goodness and mercy of God doesn't follow us like a good little puppy dog. They gallop after us like a celestial stallion. They chase us down paths like the hound of heaven. They stay hot on our heels all the way to heaven's gate and into the arms of the Father."*

— Chad Bird

Wonder in the Permanence. The psalm doesn't end in the pasture. It doesn't end in the valley. It doesn't even end at the table set before enemies. It ends at home. The shepherd has been leading somewhere the entire time — through provision and difficulty, through enemies and hospitality — until we are welcomed not to a better season but to a permanent one.

*"For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

Revelation 7:17

The Lamb is the Shepherd. The one who was slain for the flock now leads the flock home — to living water, every hunger and thirst finally and completely satisfied, every tear wiped away.

Lost. Found. Through. Forever. The shepherd restores our souls — all the way home.

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The goal this morning is that you would see the goodness of God in this familiar psalm — through all the seasons and journeys, the good times and the difficult times. That we

wouldn't be like those horses pushing through the fence, convinced the grass is greener. That we would see what the shepherd offers is infinitely better, infinitely more wonderful. If that means repentance, then repent. If it means letting go of our own striving, then let go. God holds on. See his grace and mercy. Let your heart be refreshed and restored.

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