

**The Best News from a Most Familiar Text
Psalm 23**

**November 4, 2018
(In Remembrance of Billy Graham's 100th Birthday)**

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Introduction to the Text: As you may or may not know, if Billy Graham would have lived, this Wednesday, November 7, he would have turned 100 years old. As for me, I wished he had lived to this milestone birthday. For him, he was ready to go, and is more alive today in Heaven than his 99+ years on this earth.

In my lifetime, he is the greatest evangelist. Only eternity will reveal the numbers of people in heaven as a direct result of his crusade ministry. My purposes today is not to eulogize the life of Billy Graham, but in honor of his coming 100th birthday to preach a message that calls people to decide to follow Jesus.

When asked what was different about preaching when he started and at the end of his public preaching ministry, Graham noted:

“Nothing has really changed in terms of the needs of people. Whenever or whatever you preach, you must remind them of their sin, speak to them about Heaven and Hell, show them to the cross, and urge them to come to the Savior.”

In honor of this great man, I want to do specifically that today. For a text, we read Psalm 23.

Text: (CSB) The LORD is my shepherd;
I have what I need.
² He lets me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside quiet waters.
³ He renews my life;
he leads me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
⁴ Even when I go through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.
⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
as long as I live.

Let's read it together from the King James Version.

(KJV) The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Introduction: Without a doubt, Psalm 23 is the most well-known passage of the Bible. We know what Psalm 23 says, but do we know what the words mean? We perhaps can recite the words, but do we have a relationship with the Shepherd? One little girl got the words a little confused when she said, “The Lord is my Shepherd—that’s all I want.” Maybe she got the words a little wrong, but perhaps she got the message just right.

My prayer this week has been that we do not lose the magnificence of the message in the familiarity of the form. That is, may we tune in and not out, even though we have heard these words over and over again. For the sake of providing some structure to Psalm 23 and the message of the Shepherd, let us approach our subject around two parallel ideas: Understanding God as my shepherd helps me to (1) Confront who I am and (2) Clarify who God is. We will spend just a moment on the first truth, then move to the second, because that’s where we understand the beauty of this passage.

Understanding God as My Shepherd Helps Me:

To Confront Who I Am!

Understanding the LORD as shepherd helps me, first of all, to confront who I am. Who are you? Who am I? We are people in need. We are in need of a shepherd. I must come to understand that...

- **I cannot provide for all of my needs.**

We try to provide for all of our needs, but we are left wanting.

- **I cannot produce my own righteousness.**

The Bible says in Romans 3:10, “There is none righteous, no, not one.” The Bible says in Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.”

Quite simply, what this means is that we can never do enough good things to overcome our sinful nature. We can’t go enough (to church), give enough, or do good enough to be made right with God. We are helpless when it comes to producing our own righteousness or right standing with God.

- **I cannot put off my death.**

Some try, but we can’t avoid death. All of this shows our need for the Shepherd.

Maybe there is no other way to say it than to say that what some of us need is to “get over ourselves.” We don’t like to admit it, but some of us are like the athletes who “thump” their chests so that others will recognize their good play. Sports columnist Rick Reilly puts them in their place when he wrote, “Stop

thumping your chest. The line blocked, the quarterback threw you a perfect spiral while getting his head knocked off, and the defense was watching the *good* receiver instead of you. Get over yourself.”¹

To Clarify Who God is!

The second truth is that understanding God as my shepherd helps me to clarify who God is.

- **God provides what we cannot.**

The good news about our inability to provide for ourselves is that God can, and even better, He is willing. What can He provide? Exactly what we cannot provide for ourselves!

What?

For simplicity, let's put it this way. God provides...

(1) Stuff for this life.

“I shall not want.” Do you believe that? In Psalm 23, we move from wanting to “cup running over.”

(2) Salvation for the next life.

(3) Security as we enter from one life to the other.

Why?

Why does God want to do this? For us, yes, but more importantly, “For His name’s sake!” His name—the credibility of His name—is at stake by His providing for us.

I pause to confess to you that though we have heard this text over and over and over, we haven't understood the truths of this text. I pause to announce to you that we are not even doing justice to the meaning of this text in this message today. In order to do that, we would have to pour over every word and we would run out of time after the first two words, “The LORD.” Who is providing for us? Well, let's see. Yahweh—the one who is “I am.” He doesn't go beyond that, because He wanted us to understand that “He is whatever we need Him to be.” He is Yahweh Jireh—the Provider. He is Yahweh Rophe—our Healer. He is Yahweh Nissi—our Banner—the one who fights for us or who helps us in our battles. We discover in another place that He is Yahweh Mekaddishkem—the one who sanctifies us or makes us holy. He is Yahweh Shalom—the one who gives us peace. And He is Yahweh Sebaoth—the one who is Almighty. Now, here in Psalm 23, we learn that He cares so much for us that He is our Shepherd. I'm trying to remind us that this is the God who is providing for us. No wonder Paul prayed, “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:19) No wonder Paul declared, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.” (Colossians 2:20)

¹ As quoted by Max Lucado, *Traveling Light*, p. 76. The actual quote from Rick Reilly is “...and the *good* receiver blew the double coverage. Get over yourself.” I changed the wording for clarity for the non-football inclined.

- **God is a personal God.**

We're almost at the end here, but I think we are yet to uncover the greatest truth of this text. The LORD is *my* shepherd! God desires the relationship to be intensely personal.

The story is told of a French chaplain who often used Psalm 23 to encourage soldiers before a battle. He taught them to recite just the beginning phrase, "The LORD is my shepherd," by clicking off the words one finger at a time. The little finger represented "The" and so forth until the thumb represented "Shepherd." The chaplain placed special emphasis on this word "my" with the index finger. He reminded them of this truth that God is a personal God as they went off to the battle. Did the chaplain's words find their mark? They did in the life of one young man. He was found dead with his right hand clutching the index finger of the left.²

- **God pursues a relationship with us.**

There is an emphasis in this text of God's pursuit of us. This pursuit is evident in just the analogy of the shepherd. You remember the story Jesus told. "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? (Luke 15:4)

The emphasis of God's pursuit is evident in the actions of the shepherd as described by the Psalmist. He makes. He leads. He restores. He leads. The Psalmist changes to directly addressing God. You prepare. You anoint.

Then, we see the ultimate pursuit. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me." Moses can tell you about God's pursuit. He was forty years on the run for murder when he looked over his shoulder and saw God. Jonah can tell you about God's pursuit. He ran from God, but couldn't run away from God. Peter? Thinking he would return to fishing after his betrayal of Jesus, he looked over his shoulder to hear Jesus inviting him for breakfast for him on the beach.³ What's your story of God's pursuit? Maybe you just need to stop and be caught by the Shepherd today.

A Closing Illustration

The Shepherd of John 10

In John 10, Jesus reveals Himself as the good shepherd. He indicates among several things that "The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep." (John 10:11) A little later in this passage, Jesus indicates, "I lay down My life for the sheep."

That's exactly what Jesus has done for you. The imagery of the shepherd is the shepherd becoming the door for the sheep. The shepherd would position himself in the "door" thus keeping the sheep in the pen and the aggressors out of the pen. Jesus has come to do just the same for you. Do you know Him as your good shepherd? Have you trusted Him to provide what you cannot? Most importantly, what you cannot provide for yourself is eternal life. I want to lead you in a prayer whereby you can know Him as the good shepherd.

² Ibid., p. 86.

³ Ibid., p. 146.

Now, before we pray, I want to ask you some questions.

Do you believe that Jesus died and when He died a miracle occurred? The miracle is that a transfer took place. He took your sin and you took His righteousness in exchange.

Are you willing to repent of your sin? Repent means to turn. Are you willing to turn yourself away from sin and turn to God.

Billy Graham said, "Everyone has three great fears—the fear of emptiness, the fear of guilt, and the fear of death." And the Shepherd takes care of all three."