

## Why We Need the Shepherd

### Psalm 23:1

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Scripture can save a person's life. I witnessed this firsthand. Early in my ministry, I went to visit a man who had gone through a major crisis. He was a prominent man in the community, but all that came crashing down because of an indiscretion that went public. I went to see the man, and when I saw him, he was the shell of the man I used to know. I had gotten word that he had tried to take his life, there was so much shame over this event. When we sat down in his living room, he told me I was the very first person in the community to come visit him. He said he felt so alone. Well, after he shared with me all of his turmoil, he got up from the couch, he went over to his bookshelf, and took out a Bible and handed it to me, and asked me to read him some Scripture.

And I said, "Well, I'm happy to do that. What passage would you like me to read?" And he said, "Oh, the 23rd Psalm. My dad used to read that to me when I was a kid." And so, I began, "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want." When I finished reading that passage, his eyes were closed and there were tears coming down his cheeks and he said, "Read it again. Please read it again," and so I read it again. On that day, I must have read the 23rd Psalm at least a half a dozen times. Well, I would go back and visit this man several times over the next several months, and every time I went to visit him, he'd take out the same Bible and ask me to read the 23rd Psalm.

I ran into the man several years later, and fortunately healing had taken place in his life. I was taken aback when he said to me, "Pastor Charley, those visits, when you read to me the 23rd Psalm, literally saved my life in the midst of the most difficult time in my life." He said, "I walked through the valley of the shadow and my Shepherd was there, and you reminded me of that."

One could argue that the 23rd Psalm is the most beloved and most popular passage in all of Scripture. It is read and prayed at more bedsides and hospitals and worship services and funerals than we can count. It strikes a deep chord within us. Perhaps, when I referred to it just a moment ago, you thought of a pivotal moment in your life when that Psalm meant so very

much to you. But what makes it so special? What makes it so significant?

I believe one of the things that makes it so special is that it names our deep dependence and our deep need for a shepherd. David begins the Psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd." Now oftentimes when we read this Psalm, we kind of say that first verse rather plainly, but for David, it was a proud statement. The Lord is my Shepherd. In other words, you want to know who my Lord is, who my Shepherd is? The Lord. You want to know who guides me and protects me? It is the Lord. The Lord is my Shepherd.

The truth is we need a shepherd, just like David, because believe it or not, we humans are very similar to sheep. There's a reason why this particular Psalm refers to us, or compares us, to sheep. Sheep are completely dependent upon the shepherd for their survival and for their life. Sheep would get lost, abused, and devoured without guidance and protection. Sheep depend completely on a shepherd for their for every aspect of their lives.

Like sheep we desperately need a shepherd. But in our prouder moments, if we're honest, we kind of hide this, or don't want to admit it. When we're worshiping, or we're in church, or we're in Sunday school and in our Sunday best, we can readily admit, yes, we need a shepherd, but oftentimes during the week, in our prouder moments, we take pride in being self-reliant and taking care of ourselves, and being individualistic.

We know how to be successful. We know how to plan. We know how to take care of things. We're not victims. All that's well and good until crisis hits. Until that phone call comes in the middle of the night and rocks our world. Until the doctor comes into the examination room and gives us the report, the pathology report. Until we make that bad decision and our life spirals into darkness, and we feel like we have no hope and no help. Until COVID hits. And our life is literally turned upside down, and the things we took for granted for so long are taken away. It is then, in those very moments, that we realize we desperately

share, I think, the most compelling reasons why we need a shepherd. Why you need a shepherd.

If you listen to this message and take it into your heart, I believe it can make all the difference in the world to you. **One of the reasons why we need a shepherd, honestly, is that we need strength for living.** Now, some of you may remember the old, epic movie, Ben-Hur, starring Charlton Heston. During the filming of the movie, Heston really struggled trying to learn how to drive a chariot. He practiced and practiced and practiced, and he still didn't feel very confident. So he went to the director and said, "Listen, I think I can drive the chariot, but I'm not sure I can win the race," and his director replied, "Listen, just stay in that chariot, and I'll make sure you win the race."

So often, life is a lot like struggling to drive a chariot through over and under insurmountable obstacles in life. Between raising teenagers and dealing with marital problems, and health issues, and financial problems, it can sap our joy and take away our hope. The question is, how do we deal with that? How do we cope?

Well, the secret is simply to stay in our chariot and trust God with our fears, our anxieties and our worries. Perhaps the word that some of you need to hear right now, because maybe you feel like you're in the midst of darkness and pain. Maybe you feel without hope today, for whatever reason. Well, here's the word for you today. You don't have to figure everything out. Your job is to stand firm in your faith and trust God with the rest, because you see, our God is faithful. Our God never fails us. He is always there, strengthening us. He never lets us go. He never disappoints, and He's going to make sure that evil and darkness never prevail in your life. Our Shepherd will give you the strength.

A preacher friend of mine recalls when he was in seminary and his favorite professor got word that his only son had been killed in a car accident. Well, his professor immediately left the classroom, jumped into his car, and drove to the very city his son lived. A month went by and no one had heard from this professor and, of course, many were concerned. They thought he had literally fallen apart, but one day there was a chapel service at that seminary, and this professor, he slipped through the back door of the chapel and participated in the service. After the conclusion of the service, he stood up before the faculty and students and said, "I'm here to tell you that I've been at the very bottom. The very bottom."

Then he paused for a moment and got choked up, and said, "is solid. Very, very solid." Folks, you need a shepherd, and I need a shepherd, and we need a shepherd, because no matter how far we fall, no matter how deep into the darkness we go, the grace and the strength and the mercy of the Shepherd is always underneath us, and it's very, very solid. **We need a shepherd because, quite honestly, we need strength, but we also need a shepherd because we need a savior.**

In the Gospel of John 10:11, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep." Like sheep, we are vulnerable, and we cannot save ourselves. Between the predator of sin and our own fear and our own stubbornness, we are without hope without a shepherd. Now, we like to hide this truth, or dress it up, and talk about it in different ways, but no matter how we dress it up, no matter how we deny it, it doesn't make this untrue. Until we face this reality, how vulnerable we are and how we cannot save ourselves, we will never find joy. We will never find peace. We will never find freedom in living.

A preacher I know once owned a farm in the hills of Tennessee, one day he went to the spring and took a drink of water, and the water tasted awful. He knew something was wrong because usually the water tasted wonderful. He decided to go to the well and clear off all the debris, throw the junk away and pull the weeds out. He even painted the outside of the well, but the water still tasted awful. Finally, he called a repairman who was able to go deep down into that well. At the very bottom, he found the problem. It was a rotting carcass of a dead bullfrog that had fallen into the well and died, and that was the source. That was the reason why the water tasted so terrible.

The point of the story is that it doesn't matter how much you clean the outside of that well. Until you get rid of the bullfrog in that well, you haven't solved your problem.

You see, many people think that by dealing with the surface issues of life, they can solve their problems. They can find joy, they can find peace. Folks think that if they just buy a new car, or a new set of clothes, or maybe a new home, or live somewhere else, that they'll find peace and wholeness and joy, and the void will be filled in their life. They think that if they get a new job or a new relationship, then somehow that problem will be solved, but I'll tell you, it never works.

Life stinks until we find the source of our problem. What is the source of our problem? Well, it's deep, it's deep down at the bottom of the human soul. It's something that pollutes the flow of life, and forgiveness, and joy, and health, and wholeness, and peace. We in the church call it sin.

Now, you don't hear that word very often anymore, but it's the truth. It is sin, and honest to goodness, folks, we cannot fix ourselves when it comes to sin. We can't deal with our sin on our own. We can't repair ourselves, we can't save ourselves, and it's why we need a Savior, and why a Savior on a cross is at the very center of our faith. That's why Jesus came. To save us from our sins, to take our sin away and make us whole and forgive us, so we can be right with God and have joy, and peace, and wholeness, and live with newness of life.

Roy Lessin said, "If our greatest need had been information, God would've sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would've sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would've sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would've sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior." A Savior. You see, we need a savior. We need a shepherd because we need a savior, and I tell you, within the church of Jesus Christ, within our faith, people have a variety of beliefs. We may differ on particular doctrines and maybe dogma. We may differ on our beliefs and the way we interpret Scripture, and social issues, and political issues, but I tell you, the one thing that unifies us as a church, the one thing that unifies us as Christians, the one thing that unifies us as followers of Jesus Christ is that we need a Savior. We need God in Christ to do something for us that we can never do for ourselves. We need a shepherd because we need a savior.

**Yet, we also need the shepherd because we need the Shepherd's love.** I've been in pastoral ministry for almost 25 years, and in that time, I have spoken and I have counseled people from all walks of life, having all kinds of experiences in life. From all those conversations and all those experiences as a pastor, I've come to this very simple conclusion. What people really need is love. They don't need judgment. They don't need criticism. They don't need cheap advice. They need love. They need the light of compassion and mercy to shine on them and make them whole again.

Many years ago, mules were used in coal mines to carry cars of coal from one side of the mine to the other. For a long time, these mules, they were stabled in the very

mine, underground, and never saw the light of day, until miners discovered that unless these mules were exposed to the sunlight at least once a week, they would go blind. They needed the exposure of light to retain their sight. You know, folks, the world can be a cruel and dark place.

I know I don't need to tell you that. It can distort our lives and our vision. Like a progressive cataract, the darkness of life, the hateful experiences of life, the negativity of life can cause us to lose our sight without noticing it. It's insidious, and before long, we can no longer see God's love for us. We can no longer see our worth. We can no longer see the blessings of God. We can no longer see the mercies of God.

But I tell you this, there is One who's always ready to love us back to life. There is always One whose light can restore our sight, and I'm talking about the love and the light of the Shepherd. All we have to do is turn from the darkness into the light of the Shepherd, to receive that light, to experience that light, to walk in that light.

I'll tell you, folks, the love and light of the Shepherd is relentless. When we wander off, He's there to follow us. When we fall down, He picks us up. When we fail, He gives us a second chance. When we sin, He forgives us. When we betray Him, He's always ready to receive us back when we turn back to Him. The point is, you don't have to walk in darkness.

You can walk in the love and the light of the Shepherd, and it doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter how far you've wandered off. You are never ever too far from the love of the Shepherd. You are never outside the grasp of the love of the Shepherd. You may be thinking, though, "But Charlie, you don't know what I've done. You don't know what I've said. You don't know where I've been." Well, that's true, I don't, but I'll tell you what I do know. There is nothing that you have done, there is nothing that you have said that keeps you away from the love of God. Nothing. God's love is there.

You see, Jesus didn't come for perfect people. He came for those who are falling apart. Maybe you feel like you're falling apart today. Maybe you are experiencing a personal crisis, maybe the loss of a loved one, and you are literally falling apart. You are never outside the love of the Shepherd, who is always there to undergird you, to strengthen you, to empower you, to walk with you through whatever valley, through whatever

confusion. Don't lose sight of His love.

Mary Ann Bird was born with multiple birth defects. She had a cleft palate, and was deaf in one ear, and a disfigured face, and lopsided feet. As you might imagine, her childhood was brutal, especially at school. Classmates would tease her, and mock her, and ridicule her. Mary Ann said that the very worst day of school, every year, was the day of the hearing test. Back in those days, they typically did hearing tests this way. They would call the pupil before the class, and the student would stand in front of the class, and the teacher would whisper something in the child's ear and the child was supposed to repeat it to the class.

Well, for some reason, the teacher always spoke and Mary Ann's bad ear, and she couldn't hear. She couldn't hear the whisper. She tried to guess, but she never got it right, and the kids would just laugh.

One year, Mary Ann found herself in the class of her all-time favorite teacher, Ms. Leonard, and the day of the hearing test came, and Mary Ann honestly was terrified. Usually, during this test, the teacher would whisper something in the child's ear like, "The sky is blue," or, "You have new shoes." When it was Mary Ann's turn, she came up to Mrs. Bird, in front of the class... Mrs. Leonard. And Ms. Leonard, she didn't whisper in her ear, "The sky is blue," or, "You have new shoes." She whispered to Mary Ann, "I wish you were my little girl." And Mary Ann said when she heard those words, that somebody cared for me, and loved me, and wanted me, it changed everything for me.

Do you feel like you're in the dark today? Do you feel like you've fallen apart? Do you feel like you're without hope and have no way out? If you listen carefully today, you'll hear the Shepherd whisper to you, "You're my child. I created you. I love you. I've never left you. I have never forsaken you. There is nothing you can do to make Me love you more. Come into My light, bathe in My love." We need a shepherd because we need strength. We need a shepherd

because we need a savior. We need a shepherd because we need the Shepherd's love.

Let's pray. Lord, I pray for those who are in desperate need of Your light and love, and that You would shower Your light and love and grace on them. I pray for those who are at the very bottom, that they would feel the solidness of Your grace and strength. Oh Lord, we need You. Come and give us strength. Come and save us. Come and love on us, Lord. We need it. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.



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