

I. SERMON OUTLINE

Responding to God the Lavish Provider: Four Options

Question: How Might We Respond to Psalm 23's Message of God as a Lavish Provider?

Possible Answers: There are Four "FC" Options:

Flagrant Cynicism, Fearless Comfort, Faith in Christ, Firm Commitment

II. QUOTABLE QUOTES AND SUMMARY NOTES

Prayer:

*"O God, our Shepherd and King,
Who brought again your Son Jesus from the valley of death.
Encourage us with your protecting presence,
both when we skip through fresh pastures,
and when we walk through the darkest valleys.
Encourage us at all times with your promise
That we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen."*¹

"Has any psalm occasioned the spilling of more ink than Psalm 23? The psalm may be the most-beloved, most-sung, most-prayed, and most-studied poem in the Psalter." (Rolf Jacobsen.)

"It is between those two dynamics—the divine promise, 'I am with you,' and the response of faith, 'You are with me'—that the currents of the life of faith ebb and flow." (Jacobsen.)

[In John 10] the New Testament is faithfully confessing the incarnation in Jesus of the same divine shepherd whom the ancient psalmist trusted." (Jacobsen.)

"Recalling God's presence removes what the deathly dark valley invites--fear."

"Sheep do not just 'take care of themselves' . . . They require more than any other class of livestock, constant care and attention." (Philip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, 20-21.)

1. "So the Lord is our Shepherd. He provides us with rest, food, water, and vitality; he leads us in the right paths, is with us and encourages us. That is what a good shepherd does." (Greidanus, *Psalms*, 357.)
2. "There are two [main] structural developments in the psalm . . . the change in metaphor from the Lord as Shepherd (vv. 1-4) to that of the Lord as banquet host (vv. 5-6) . . . and where the poem changes from speaking about the Lord in the third person to speaking to the Lord in prayer." (Greidanus, *NICOT Psalms*, 239.)
3. "It is noteworthy that it is precisely in the middle of the crisis (*the darkest valley*) that the Psalm shifts from creedal affirmations about God to trusting prayer to God. It is in moments of crisis that the Lord moves from an abstract concept (a *he* about whom one has memorized doctrinal statements) to a living God with whom one has a relationship (a *you* in whom one trusts, to one speaks, on whom one can rely)." (Jacobson, 244.)

¹ Adapted from John Eaton, *Psalms*, 125 [via Greidanus].

4. "One morning at dawn I found nine of my choicest ewes, all soon to lamb, lying dead in the field where a cougar had harried the flock during the night. It was a terrible shock to a young man like myself just new to the business and unfamiliar with such attacks. From then on I slept with a .303 rifle and flashlight by my bed. At the least sound of the flock being disturbed I would leap from bed and calling my faithful collie, dash out into the night, rifle in hand, ready to protect my sheep. In the course of time, I came to realize that nothing so quieted and reassured the sheep is to see me in the field." (Keller, *Psalm 23*, 37.)
5. Psalm 23 is now widely recognized as having a place with a pyramid structure consisting in the sequencing of Psalms 15-24, with Psalm 19 at the apex, and with Psalms of similar theme broadening out below. (Psalm 23 reflects in miniature the themes of those descending below the apex, ending with entrance to the Lord's house.)

		Ps 19			Hymn of Natural and Revealed Law
		Ps 18	Ps 20-21		Royal Hymns
	Ps 17		Ps 22		Lament Hymns
	Ps 16			Ps 23	Comfort Psalms
Ps 15				Ps 24	Procession-to-Temple Hymns

6. "In the following verses David mentions seven things the Lord as shepherd does for him and us.

First, the shepherd gives us rest. ²	V. 2 "Makes me lie down"
Second, a good shepherd provides plenty of food.	V. 2: "in <i>green pastures</i> ."
Third, the shepherd leads his sheep to safe water.	V. 2: "he leads . . .still waters"
Fourth, the shepherd provides life, vitality.	V. 3: "restores my soul"
Fifth, the shepherd leads us in right paths.	
Sixth, the shepherd is personally with us.	
Seventh, the shepherd provides comfort, that is encouragement, when we go through these dark valleys.	

III. ISSUES

1. Where is God when things are not going well?

"The Lord's presence in moments of crisis is both a profound assurance and also a profound warning for how we theologically construct God's presence. As a promise it is the good news that there is no place in which the Lord's presence cannot manifest itself to dispel fear (*I fear no evil*) and to deliver those who suffer (cf. Psalm 139; Rom. 8:31ff.). As a warning about theological constructions of God's presence, it is an element that critiques and subverts the dominant cultural theology of glory which can only understand God's presence in the good moments. The psalmist asserts that, yes, the Lord is present in the *green pastures, peaceful waters*, and along the *paths of righteousness*. But the Lord is also present 'under the sign of the opposite'—in *the darkest valley*. The metaphor of the *rod and staff* is an image of the shepherd's effective power to save the sheep from threat." (Jacobson, 243-44.)

2. What is the setting for the banquet motif?

"Is this simply a metaphor for provision, such as that alluded to in Ps. 78:19 where the grumbling people question whether God can spread a table in the wilderness? Is this a table of hospitality such as the one

² Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28)"

that the unaware Abraham spread while entertaining angels (Gen. 18:1–8)? Is this a feast of thanksgiving, such as one might celebrate after a harvest or some other experience of God's blessing (Deut. 12:17–19; 14:22–29)? Is the meal a ritual meal in response to the 'oracle of salvation' that the psalmist has [possibly] heard from a priest? Should we think of a royal context, such as that mentioned in 2 Sam. 9:7-13 and alluded to in Prov. 25:6-7, in which rival courtiers are the enemies who seek to disgrace the psalmist? Or should we imagine an eschatological feast in which God's provision for the poor and needy is manifest (cf. Isaiah 55)? The many possibilities prevent isolating any singular setting in life for the metaphor. What is undeniable is that the Lord is a hospitable host who provides plenteous nourishment (my cup is abundant) and honor (you anoint my head with oil) for the psalmist in the face of hostile foes." (Jacobson, NICOT, 244.)

IV. RELEVANT PASSAGES

1. **Ezekiel 34:1-6, 11-16**—*Prophecy against the wicked shepherd kings of Israel (1-6), followed by God's pledge to regather the flock (from the diaspora) and otherwise shepherd them well (11-16)*

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ² O mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy, and say to them:

To the shepherds: Thus said the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel, who have been tending yourselves! Is it not the flock that the shepherds ought to tend? ³ You partake of the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, and you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not tend the flock. ⁴ You have not sustained the weak, healed the sick, or bandaged the injured; you have not brought back the strayed, or looked for the lost; but you have driven them with harsh rigor, ⁵ and they have been scattered for want of anyone to tend them; scattered, they have become prey for every wild beast. ⁶ My sheep stray through all the mountains and over every lofty hill; My flock is scattered all over the face of the earth, with none to take thought of them and none to seek them. . .

¹¹ For thus said the Lord GOD: Here am I! I am going to take thought for My flock and I will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some [animals] in his flock have gotten separated, so I will seek out My flock, I will rescue them from all the places to which they were scattered on a day of cloud and gloom. ¹³ I will take them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them to their own land, and will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses and in all the settled portions of the land. ¹⁴ I will feed them in good grazing land, and the lofty hills of Israel shall be their pasture. There, in the hills of Israel, they shall lie down in a good pasture and shall feed on rich grazing land. ¹⁵ I Myself will graze My flock, and I Myself will let them lie down—declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will look for the lost, and I will bring back the strayed; I will bandage the injured, and I will sustain the weak; and the fat and healthy ones I will destroy. I will tend them rightly. (JPSV.)

2. **Isaiah 36:6**—*description of the failing effects of a feeble staff (see also Ezek. 29:5-8)*

⁶ "You are relying on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which enters and punctures the palm of anyone who leans on it."

3. **Mark 6:30-44**—*echoes of Psalm 23 in Mark's account of Jesus feeding the 5000*

³⁰The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and **rest a while.**" For many were coming and going, and they had **no leisure even to eat.** ³² And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and **he had compassion on them, because**

they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.³⁵ And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late.³⁶ Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”³⁷ But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii⁶ worth of bread and give it to them to eat?”³⁸ And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.”³⁹ Then he commanded them all **to sit down in groups on the green grass.**⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties.⁴¹ And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all.⁴² And **they all ate and were satisfied.**⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.⁴⁴ And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

ⁱ This [second] change is important because of the rhetorical location where it happens (in *the darkest valley*) and also because of what is said: *you are with me.*” (Ibid.)