

Psalms 23 — The LORD Is My Shepherd — Green Pastures, the Valley of the Shadow, the Host's Table, and the House of the LORD For Ever

Psalm 23: a psalm of David — six verses of total trust in the LORD as Shepherd who provides (vv. 1–3), as the Presence who walks the valley of the shadow of death (v. 4), and as the Host who spreads a table before enemies and anoints the head with oil (v. 5), ending in goodness and mercy pursuing the sheep all their days and dwelling in the house of the LORD for ever (v. 6).

Of the hundred and fifty psalms, this is the one the world knows by heart. It is prayed over the dying and sung over the newborn, carved on headstones and whispered in hospital hallways, and it has comforted more grief than any other six verses in the Bible. And yet familiarity has a way of wearing the edges off a thing until we stop seeing it. So come to Psalm 23 slowly, as if for the first time, because underneath the beloved cadence is a piece of Hebrew poetry doing something bold and precise.

Hebrew Word Studies

ra'ah (H7462) (רָאָה) — **to shepherd, tend, feed, pasture — and as a participle, "shepherd" v. 1.** The word the whole psalm grows from. *Ra'ah* is first a verb — "to tend, to graze, to pasture a flock" — and the noun "shepherd" is simply its participle: a shepherd is *one who is shepherding*, caught in the act. So "the LORD is my shepherd" is less a title than a description of what he is always doing. It is the verb behind God's promise through Ezekiel, spoken against the failed shepherds of Israel: "I will feed [*ra'ah*] my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord GOD... I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away" (Ezek. 34:15–16) — the very acts of Psalm 23:1–3, promised by God in the first person. It is what Jacob calls God at the end of his life: "the God which fed me all my life long unto this day" (Gen. 48:15), where "fed" is *ra'ah* — God as the shepherd of a whole life. And it is the office the risen Christ handed to Peter three times over: "Feed my sheep" (Jn. 21:16–17). The point of the participle is that shepherding is never finished; it is a present-tense, all-day, all-life labor. "I shall not want" is simply the sheep's report on a shepherd who never stops shepherding.

tsalmavet (H6757) (צַלְמַוֶּת) — **shadow of death, deep darkness, the shadow of death v. 4.** One of the most haunting words in Hebrew. *Tsalmavet* is a compound — *tsel*, "shadow," fused with *mavet*, "death" — so the KJV's "shadow of death" is exactly literal: the darkness that death casts. It is the word Job reaches for again and again to describe the pit of suffering — "a land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death" (Job 10:22) — and the word for the dungeon-dark from which God rescues: he "bringeth out those which are bound... them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Ps. 107:10, 14). The image is not merely a shaded ravine but the very shadow *thrown by death itself* falling across the living. And this is precisely the darkness Isaiah promised the Messiah would pierce: "the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death [*tsalmavet*], upon them hath the light shined" (Isa. 9:2) — a prophecy Matthew places over the opening of Christ's ministry (Matt. 4:16). So when the sheep walks through *tsalmavet* fearing no evil, it is not bravado. It is a sheep who has learned that the Shepherd is himself the light that death's shadow cannot survive.

shevet (H7626) / mishenah (H4938) (שֵׁבֶט / מִשְׁנָה) — **rod, staff, club, scepter / staff, support, that on which one leans v. 4.** The shepherd's two tools, and they are opposites that comfort together. *Shevet* is the club — a rod of striking, defense, and rule; it is the same word for a ruler's "scepter" ("The sceptre shall not depart from Judah," Gen. 49:10) and for the "rod" of correction in Proverbs. In the shepherd's belt it is the weapon that breaks a predator's skull. *Mishenah*, by contrast, comes from the verb *sha'an*, "to lean, to support oneself" — it is literally a *thing you lean on*, the crook that steadies and rescues rather than strikes. So the two words divide the labor of love: the *shevet* is power turned outward against what would destroy the sheep, the *mishenah* is support turned toward the sheep to hold it up. That the sheep is comforted by both — even the striking-rod — is the quiet genius of the line: in a good Shepherd's hand, even the instrument of force is on the sheep's side. The Lord's discipline is not the opposite of his tenderness; Hebrews says the same, that "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth" (Heb. 12:6), and the sheep of Psalm 23 has learned to lean on the very hand that also fights for it.

mashach (H1878) / shulchan (H7979) (מָשַׁח / שֻׁלְחָן) — **to make fat, anoint richly, satisfy with abundance / table v. 5.** Two words of welcome. The verb behind "thou anointest my head" here is *dashen* (H1878), whose root sense is "to make fat, to make rich, to satisfy abundantly" — not the formal anointing-verb of kings (*mashach*), but a word of lavish, oily abundance, of a head made to glisten with plenty. The Psalms use it for the overflowing goodness of God's house: "they shall be abundantly satisfied [*dashen*] with the fatness of thy house; and thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures"

(Ps. 36:8). And *shulchan*, "table," is no mere slab — it is the word for the table of shewbread in the tabernacle, the LORD's own table in his own house (Ex. 25:23–30), and for the fellowship of eating in his presence. Put the two together and verse 5 is quietly a temple scene: a table like the Lord's table, a head made rich with oil, a cup that overflows. The sheep of the pasture has been brought indoors and seated as a guest of honor in the house of God — which is exactly where the final verse says it will stay.

***chesed* (H2617) / *radaph* (H7291) (חֶסֶד / רָדַף) — steadfast love, mercy, covenant loyalty, lovingkindness / to pursue, chase, hunt after v. 6.** The two words that close the psalm, and they are a stunning pair. *Chesed* is arguably the most important word in the Old Testament's vocabulary of God — the loyal, covenant-keeping, unbreakable love the LORD shows to those in relationship with him. It is the word thundered through Psalm 136, "his mercy [*chesed*] endureth for ever," twenty-six times over; the word God proclaims of his own character to Moses, "abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy [*chesed*] for thousands" (Ex. 34:6–7). It is not a feeling that comes and goes but a commitment that holds. And *radaph* is its shocking companion: to *pursue, chase, hunt* — the verb of armies and predators and Pharaoh at the Red Sea. Every other time the sheep of a psalm is pursued, it is by enemies; David takes the word for what hunts you and makes God's *goodness* and *chesed* the hunters. This is grace as relentless pursuit — the same Shepherd who "layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing" (Lk. 15:5), the God who in Alma's promise stands "with open arms to receive you" (Alma 5:33). You do not, in the end, find your way to the house of the LORD by your own navigation. You are chased there, all your days, by a covenant love that refuses to lose the trail.

From the Chapter's Architecture

And under it runs the steady music of Hebrew parallelism — the poetry's habit of saying a thing twice in balanced halves: "green pastures" answered by "still waters," "goodness" paired with "mercy," "the paths of righteousness" set against "the valley of the shadow of death." The couplets give the psalm its unhurried, breathing cadence, the very quality that has made it the most memorized chapter in the Bible. It reads the way a sheep walks behind a trusted shepherd: unhurried, unafraid, one step and then the next, all the way home.