

June 21/22, 2025

He Leads, I Rest
Everything We Need Series
Psalm 23:2b
Pastor Ryan Harmon

I don't know about you, but rest is a struggle for me. It always has been; it still is to this very day. And because of that, because rest is a struggle, I have found that the reality of Psalm 23 presents, for me, a lifelong pursuit. I don't want to just know those words. I don't want to just be able to recite them. I want them to come and be housed in the very fabric of my being, to make the foundation of my life firm and secure. I don't want to just know these words; I want to believe them.

There's no question that Psalm 23 is one of the most beloved passages in all of Scripture. If you were to find a ranking of Scriptures that people love, Psalm 23, no doubt, would be near the top. And I think part of that is because of the picture that it presents, a picture of rest and assurance and sufficiency. We long for that. So because of that, it's known by nearly everybody. It's been memorized by many people. It's been tattooed even by some. You certainly can find home furnishings with it stenciled right there on a pillow or to go above your mantle. It's been all of those things. But I would suggest to you that it has been believed and lived by very few. In the midst of our weary world, an overly burdened world, Psalm 23 calls out and offers a word from a different reality that says it does not have to be this way. The question for us is, "Will we listen and will we receive the gift of the rest that Psalm 23 presents?" That's what we want to consider this morning, and all summer really. So open your Bibles with me to Psalm 23.

We're just going to be in the second half of verse 2 this morning. We're walking very slowly. The goal, of course, is that we just would marinate in it, that we would just meditate on these words and ask ourselves each week, "Is that true for me? Do I believe that?" It's important as we begin, that we recount a little bit of where we've been. We've been in this series now for three weeks. It's the third week and Mark launched us two weeks ago with the very first verse, **The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want**. Mark helped us understand that when we read that word **LORD** throughout the Old Testament, whenever that word is in all capital letters, it's referring to Yahweh. Yahweh, the personal name of God, the name that He gave to His people Israel, the name that was intended to make their memory go back to the fact that He was the One that delivered them out of bondage, delivered them out of Egypt, and gave them His personal name as He forged a personal relationship with them, and made them His people. And the truth of verse 1 is that if the LORD is your shepherd, then the reality is that you can live a life that's marked by saying, **I shall not want**. He provides for all of my needs; I have everything I need. That language is important because the psalm doesn't say **The LORD is my shepherd, He gives me everything I want**. It's important that we catch that He provides for all of our needs. He allows us to live in a place where we don't want for anything because our needs are taken care of. All of us have a number of wants that actually aren't needs. We start to think, over time, that they're needs. We start to become compulsively

addicted to the idea that they're a need. And so we drive and strive to make sure that we have them in our life. But ultimately, most of our wants, at best, are things that are unnecessary, and, at worst, they're things that are actually quite bad for us.

All of us walk through life because of sin with a “wanter” that is broken, that's misshapen. We “want” things that actually aren't good for us. So Psalm 23, from the outset, works as something that calibrates our wants, and helps us understand there are needs that I have. They are essential, and the LORD provides them. Everything that follows after verse 1, really is an explanation of that key statement. It's a description and an illustration of the ways that the Lord is a shepherd that richly provides for the needs of His people. So he continues, and says:

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

Last week, Bryan reminded us that when we think of **green pastures**, we can't picture a scene like the one that's up here on our flannelgraph. Maybe you grew up with a flannelgraph and you recognize a scene like that. It's not a Nebraska countryside, full and lush. This is the Judean wilderness, and green pastures were quite rare. And in coming to the Lord, we are coming to a Shepherd that has adequate knowledge to bring us into the places that we so desperately need. He can navigate the dangerous wilderness of life and bring us to a place where our needs are so richly provided for, that we actually can lie down right in the midst of a bunch of food and rest. That's one half of the picture of rest that comes in verse 2. A sheep needs food, and the LORD richly provides for that. But as we continue in verse 2, a sheep also needs water. So that's what the second half of verse 2 focuses on. It says:

He leads me beside quiet waters.

We're walking slowly through the psalm. I'm going to walk even slower through the first three words of that sentence, because I think each word is loaded with meaning for us. **He leads me.** To say **He leads me** is to refer back to what we just confessed in verse 1. **The LORD (Yahweh) is my shepherd.** And to say that means that when we get to verse 2 and we acknowledge He leads me, we are referring back to the God of the universe, the One who created everything, spoke it into existence. There was nothing; there was no matter. Then He spoke and it was...abundant in power... more than capable...all knowing...all wise...all powerful...all loving. We could go on and on. The One who knows every single thing about you, because He's the One that holds you and me and everything in existence, all dependent upon Him. The One whom the Psalms say over and over again, is abounding in love, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love—that One—that God—He is our shepherd. And He shepherds us by leading. He leads. It's important that we hear that word, because it is entirely possible for a shepherd not to lead, but to drive.

It's possible in the Middle East, even to this day, that there would be a shepherd over a flock of sheep that would decide the way they are going to operate is they are going to have a stick and they are going to beat the sheep to go where they want the sheep to go. They are going to frighten the sheep forward. They're going to drive them. But that's not how God shepherds. He shepherds with gentleness. He leads; He doesn't coerce; He doesn't drive. He shepherds us by leading us. We know from even talking to shepherds in the Middle East today that that leadership—the way shepherds lead—is quite intimate, very relational. They don't shepherd, and they don't lead as

shepherds because they're given a title, okay? "You're the shepherd; now all the sheep have to follow you." That's not the way it works. A shepherd develops a relationship with the sheep. They get to know the shepherd, and the shepherd gets to know the sheep. Then based on that common knowledge, they begin to have this interactive relationship, one that becomes so intimate that the shepherd can be out ahead of the sheep, and the sheep naturally follow the shepherd.

From listening to shepherds, we know also that they would use sounds to lead their sheep. Again, not a whip, not frightening them, but leading them...calling them. We're told that shepherds, even in the modern-day context of the Middle East, will sometimes carry a small little shepherd's flute, and on that flute, they would play a little song that is unique to them. It's just "their" song. And when their sheep hear that song, they become so accustomed to the tune of that song that they know that is their shepherd, not just "a" shepherd, but that is "their" shepherd. That's the one they're supposed to follow. If a shepherd doesn't carry a flute like that, they will use a certain song that they would sing, creating an accustomization to the sound of the voice. The sheep become so accustomed to that, so intimately aware of what their shepherd sings, that the sheep know the shepherd and they can be led by him simply by hearing him out ahead. It's a beautifully intimate picture. This is why Jesus says, "**My sheep know my voice.**" A personal relationship that leads us to the last word of this first part of verse two, **He leads me.**

A personal pronoun is so important for us to hear and to receive. It's not that He just leads generally. He leads *me*. He leads *you*. He has a personal relationship with *you*, the God of the universe. It's an entirely different thing to say, "The LORD is *a* shepherd," than to say, "The LORD is *my* shepherd." He knows me; He leads me. It confesses a very profound and important truth for us, that ours is a personal faith. Of course we come into a community of faith when we put our faith in Jesus Christ. He gives us one another, and we are rightly called the flock of God. That's an appropriate thing to think when we think of ourselves. But we can't miss the fact that each of us has been given, by God, a responsibility, a power, an ability that is so necessary for us to acknowledge, and the ability is that He lets us choose. He doesn't drive us. He leads us, which means that we, as His people, must willingly surrender to His leadership, must hear His voice and decide there's not going to be two shepherds. He's the Shepherd, and I follow His lead.

Ultimately, that's a question of surrender, of surrender to His leadership, something that each one of us must face. We must face this reality that the LORD has called us to willingly surrender to Him and to His leadership. And what Psalm 23 tells us is that we can do that, and we can do that joyously, because in confessing **The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want**, we are confessing that He is absolutely capable to the task. He has all the knowledge necessary to lead us. He knows, precisely, where the green pastures are. He knows just how to lead us through the wilderness. He knows how to provide for all of our needs. Therefore we can joyfully say that we don't have to be in charge. He's in charge. **The LORD is our Shepherd, I shall not want.**

So He provides for our needs. The first need that the psalm highlighted is food. But as verse two continues, we learn about a second need that really fills out the picture of rest. The Lord provides water.

He leads me beside quiet waters.

Now if you're like me, you find water incredibly wonderful to be around. I love being near a lake. I love seeing the ocean, even a small pond, even a pool actually has this relaxing quality to it. I've told you a number of times that my family, every year, goes up to the Okoboji Bible Conference, up in northwest Iowa, and we love the conference. It's great! But we also love the place where it takes place, the context. It's right there on West Okoboji Lake, which is a beautiful lake. And when we're by that lake, we find that it does slow us down; it helps us rest. And all of that is true about lakes and about bodies of water, and none of that is what Psalm 23 is talking about.

What we know about sheep is that they are incredibly easy to frighten. They are easily annoyed. They are easily distracted, easily discouraged. It's probably why the Bible calls us sheep all the time. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? That's what sheep are like. And here's one other thing we know about them. Sheep do not like to drink from noisy water. They don't like to drink from streams that are quickly moving. They like **quiet water**, and when it says **quiet**, it means *still*. It means *calm*.

Now water is very rare in the Middle East, and especially in the Judean wilderness. When water comes, it often comes in torrential downpours. And you can imagine in a dry and an arid environment, what that would do. It would create these deep channels and these deep troughs where the water would rush through violently. And of course that would be very unrestful and very unrelaxing, but it would also be very dangerous for the sheep. So that wouldn't be adequate. But we also know that sheep don't like to drink from even a stream that is quickly flowing.

I'm sure you can imagine a stream or a creek in a place like Colorado, where you kind of hear it, and the noise is actually restful. And you think, "I'd like to have a cup of coffee there; breakfast right next to that stream would be wonderful." And that would be true unless you were a sheep. If you were a sheep, you would not like that noise. In fact, we know from shepherds that when there is a river like that, or a stream like that, they do not want to go and drink from that part of the river. And so what a good shepherd would do is lead them to a place where the water would pool and be calm. Perhaps in the stream there are some rocks that would kind of form a pool where the water is not flowing, and that is where the good shepherd would lead them, because that's what they preferred. That's what they needed in order to drink in a restful state, to lay down and let their food digest. A good shepherd would know where that place was, would lead them directly to it, using extraordinary care for the sheep, and knowing just what they want and just what they need, and leading them right to it.

Now those spots are hard to find, so here's the second thing a good shepherd would do. A good shepherd might actually put some work into it, put some muscle into it, and if he couldn't find a place where there was a pooling bit of water, he would dig out a trench from the stream that would create a channel or a trough. Then in that channel, the water would flow in and it would be still, and the sheep would all flock to that place to get the water they so desperately needed, perfectly suited for them.

The LORD is our Shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me beside still waters. He knows exactly what we need. He's committed to providing it. When the psalm confesses that is who God is, it's saying that in coming to God, we have come to the One who is personally committed to us. He is finely attuned to precisely what we need. He knows all of it, and He is committed to extravagantly working to make sure that what we need is absolutely provided for. We come to a Shepherd, a

Shepherd who is able. Our rest depends upon knowing that a Shepherd like that is in our life. It's very important for us to hear that the state of rest, the state of saying, **I shall not want** is dependent completely upon having a Shepherd that has the knowledge and the skill and the care to bring us into a place where we can enter rest. Our rest is dependent upon the quality of and our relationship to the right shepherd. The question for each of us is, "Are we following the right shepherd?" Are we listening to the right leader? Are we listening to a leader that's able, that's capable to bring us into a place of rest in this weary world that we live in? Are we listening to false shepherds, bad shepherds, shepherds that actually cannot provide for our needs? **The LORD is our Shepherd.** He provides for all of our needs—not all of our wants—all of our needs.

As I was reflecting on this part of the psalm, it took my mind back to our time in Spain. Many of you know that we were missionaries in Madrid and attempted to do a church plant there through Lincoln Berean. We went to Spain with the intent to be there for five years. The goal was to plant a church in five years. It was an audacious goal, but we were invigorated by it, and so we went in order to do that. But as it turns out, we returned home. We officially came back to Lincoln nearly four years to the day from when we arrived in Spain. Our time in Madrid was really rich and really difficult, and that's often the way life works, isn't it...both those things coinciding together? We were there for four years, and, ultimately, the circumstances that brought us home were not circumstances of our own doing. What transpired is that in December of 2013, at around the three year mark, we learned that Janae's mom, my mother-in-law, had a recurrence of her cancer, and that cancer had metastasized to her brain. Now, if you've walked through a journey with cancer, you know that when that happens, that's a serious deal. There just aren't good treatment options at that point, and so as we were nearing Christmas, we just knew that this may very well be Marilyn's last Christmas, and so we wanted to be there. And so we flew home, and when we landed, we stepped into circumstances that were way more complex and difficult than we could possibly have imagined. That cancer journey had been so difficult that we just were very aware that Janae's mom and dad, for them to walk that road alone any longer, might undo them. And so while we planned on returning to Madrid in January, as we considered that, we just felt strongly that our role to love and honor our parents meant that we needed to stay back. We needed to walk with them through that journey. And so that's what we did. And those months were incredibly challenging, pretty chaotic to tell you the truth. You know, I was still trying to conduct leadership meetings or team meetings from Omaha, Nebraska, with an iPad on FaceTime to our team in Madrid. You can imagine the quality of leadership that was happening there. But our team was still trying to accomplish work, share the gospel and hopefully bring people into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Janae was pregnant with our second child, our daughter, Lucia, and we knew we wanted to have Lucia in Spain. So actually, when Janae was eight months pregnant, we jumped on a plane and flew to Madrid, and Lucia was born there. And then when she was one month old, we flew back to Omaha, and you should see her passport photo! She's all swaddled, and I'm holding her. Over that summer, I took Sam, our oldest, back to Madrid for five weeks. So I left Janae and Lucia and Marilyn and was in Spain for five weeks. Those were hard weeks. We welcomed a team from Lincoln Berean, a short-term mission trip, and tried to resume some ministry. By the time we got to October, the journey was nearing an end, and Marilyn went to be with the Lord in October of 2014. As I look back on that time, I can say clearly there were many things that I wanted. I wanted to be in Spain. I wanted my family to be able to resume the little life we had started to build in Spain. And I wanted all of that to be grounded in a context that meant cancer was no longer an issue, that Marilyn had been healed. That is all what I wanted. And none of that happened.

At the end of that whole time, it was probably November or December that a friend said to me, "How has the Lord been showing up for you during this time?" It was during that time, and it was in response that I think the Lord said this in order to minister to me, so this came immediately to mind. All I could say was, "I have felt sustained. Every day I've had enough, not more than enough; I've had just enough. And I've gone to bed every night thinking, 'Lord, You have to supply enough for tomorrow, tomorrow,' And the Lord provided for all of our needs every single day, not more, just enough. Not everything we wanted, but He provided just enough. Our needs were met."

The LORD is our shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me beside quiet waters. *He leads me to rest.* We live in a world that I believe is chasing after rest with every fiber of their being. Every single person longs to rest, longs to cease the anxiety and the weariness of the world, cease to strive to make yourself something. Our world is constantly chasing rest, that sense that everything's going to be okay. I think it's one of the reasons that addiction has been skyrocketing over these past decades. Even though I know addiction is a complex thing, I think at the heart of it is this longing to just have a break, just to have a slight little moment where you just forget about everything, and everything feels okay...if only for a moment. And the only way so many people know how to step into that reality is to just drink a little bit more or consume a little bit more, constantly chasing rest, but never finding it.

And so what does the psalm tell us just in these short two verses so far? Well, first, it tells us that the ability, the freedom is to be able to declare, "I lack nothing; I shall not want," is completely dependent upon surrender to the Shepherd that is adequate to the task. I can only say, **I shall not want** if I can say before that, **The LORD is my Shepherd**. The psalm tells us that green pastures are available, and actually I can lie down in them. But I have to be willing to let Him settle me down in them. There is a life available that is beside the quiet waters, but I am not going to find them on my own. I have to allow Him to lead me there. **He leads me beside the quiet waters.** See, my capacity to experience the rest my soul so desperately longs for, depends on my willingness to surrender, my willingness to cease from trying to do it all myself and find it myself, and my willingness to receive from someone else, someone more capable, that which I cannot provide for myself.

This concept of rest is a very rich concept throughout Scripture. If you would look for it, you will find it from the very first pages in Genesis, and you'll find it in the last pages in Revelation. And as you look at that concept, what you find is this truth. The rest that we so desperately long for is something we cannot achieve. We cannot claim it. We cannot chase fast enough or hard enough to finally catch it. We cannot search long enough to find it on our own. The rest that we so desperately long for has to be received as a gift...has to be received as a gift! As Jesus made His way through that same countryside, He came upon person after person, and He recognized in them that they were people longing to rest. He called Himself the Good Shepherd, and as He looked upon them, He saw that they were wandering around and they were aimless...leading themselves, constantly chasing an unending dream to find rest that they would never find.

As we read in the Gospel of Matthew, we come to a place in chapter 9, verse 36, where He looks upon the crowds and He has this to say:

Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.

Distressed, dispirited, weary, heavy-laden, lacking the rest their soul so desperately longs for. Why? Because they were sheep without a shepherd. Left to ourselves, that is what we are. We cannot find the rest that our soul so desperately longs for. And Jesus knew that, and He had compassion on the people. He longed to help them enter the rest they so desperately needed, and He knew exactly where it could be found. So it's no surprise that just two short chapters later, we're told this in Matthew 11, verses 28 to 30, where Jesus says:

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

To a **weary, heavy-laden** people, He offered a word of hope, a word of hope that came with only one necessary step: Surrender. He said, **“Come to Me.”** In other words, stop trying to do it on your own. Listen to a voice of someone more capable. Stop striving to make it all happen for yourself. Give up on that chase. Come to Me; surrender to Me. Your willingness to do that is grounded in the next thing that He says. He says, **Come to Me all who are weary and heavy-laden.** That's an acknowledgement that what I am doing is not working. I am tired. I am worn out. I am burdened. I am **heavy-laden**. Clearly I'm not doing the job. Because of that, there comes a humility and an awareness that someone else must take the lead. So Jesus says, **“Come”**. These three words are so difficult for us to come to as human beings, but they are so necessary. The words are, *“I need help. What I'm doing is not working. I am worn out.”* And for anyone that is willing to say that, Jesus says, **“Come,”** and that puts us in a position then to hear the final part of that phrase, **“Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”** Rest is a gift. We can chase it all we want; but we will never find it. It only comes through surrender, surrender to the very One who is able to give it. Jesus says, **I will give you rest.** The rest He's talking about certainly begins with the very salvation that we cannot accomplish for ourselves. We can't work hard enough; we can't strive enough; we can't do enough to earn God's favor, to earn our way to heaven, to rest and to enter Jesus' rest is first to say, *“I can't do it. By faith, I am trusting You. You paid it all.”* Jesus says, **“Cease striving, receive Me and the rest that comes with Me.”** But it doesn't stop with just our salvation. It also means that we enter into a life with the One who is capable, a life with the Shepherd that's able to lead us into rest. And because of that, we can live in a constant state of rest that knows our life is now in the hands of Someone more capable than ourselves.

Psalm 23 says that's the Shepherd, the One that's able to provide for all of our needs. In Matthew 11, Jesus uses some different agricultural imagery. He says, **Take My yoke upon you. Learn from me. My yoke is easy and My burden is light.** I don't know if anyone has seen a yoke recently. It's been replaced by horsepower and engines, and that's a good thing. We can do a lot more work that way. But a yoke was a crosspiece, a wooden crosspiece that would go across the shoulders of two animals, and it was used so that they could get work done. They could accomplish things. They could plow forward. And what Jesus is saying is, *“My yoke is easy and My burden is light because I am strong enough to bear the burdens of life. As you come to Me, you can live in relationship with Me. Be yoked to Me, and I can do all the heavy lifting. I can bear the burden. I can help you recover strength in your weary legs, because you no longer are going to be trying to*

pull this load by yourself, the very load of life. I will pull it for you. My shoulders are big enough; I can handle it. You, as we're walking, you can rest."

Psalm 23 is presented with the Good Shepherd, the One that knows everything, the One that is intimately involved in our lives. Because of that knowledge, He is able to provide for all of our needs. Jesus rounds out that picture of rest and, in coming to Jesus, we have come to One able to bear the heavy load as we walk through life. It's toilsome and hard, but we're able to do so with rest, because He is carrying the burden. He bore that burden on the cross. He bore the sin, the shame, and He's willing to bear that burden every single day as we come to Him and live in a state of surrender, saying to Him, "Jesus, I can't handle it, but I know You can." He leads, and because He leads, we can rest.

How does that offer strike you today? Where does it find you? Does it find you weary? Burdened? Heavy-laden? If so, there is a place by the quiet waters. It's available for you. It's a place of rest. All that's required is that you surrender to the One who can lead you there.

Our Father, we do come to You and we say, "You are our Good Shepherd. You're the One who can provide for all of our needs." So, Lord, help us, by Your grace, to cease this futile effort to do it ourselves. Help us to be people that surrender to You and Your ability to provide for all of our needs, that we might enter Your rest. And, Lord Jesus, You are our Good Shepherd, and we say to You that we thank You for bearing the burden of sin and shame on the cross that we could not bear, that we might enter the rest of salvation. And we do long to be people who walk with You, trusting that You, in Your strength, can bear the burdens of life, so that we can live in a state of constant rest now and forever. It's only possible through You. So we pray these things in Your name, Amen.

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