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*“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Psalm 23:4*

**Main Idea:** David writes a poem of great comfort of our Lord's marvelous care when we are in difficult and impossible times. Because the Lord is my Guide and Caretaker, He is the One Who leads me; therefore, I do not need to be in fear of what I need or what is ahead. He will steer me where to go like a shepherd caring for his sheep. I will be in the best care conceivable and His guidance will be with me where I need to go in life and all I need to do. He is my caretaker and peacemaker. I can be joyful and content in Him. I do not need to worry or stress in His care and lead. He even will refresh my mind and soul when I trust in Him. So, I can have confidence in Him to lead me in the right paths of life. Even when all around me is doom and gloom, all is lost, I can't see what it ahead or it looks to frightful, I can still place my faith and take comfort in Him. I do not need to be afraid or even concerned, because His Way is best and keeps me safe and secure. I do not need to fear my enemies, as they will just be jealous and contemptuous, but who cares about them when I am with our Lord. He gives me all I could even need that is of true eternal value. He is kind and caring, and my identity and eternal place are secure in Him.

### Contexts and Background:

Psalms 22, 23 and 24 are called the “Shepherd Psalms,” because they speak to us about Who and what Christ will do. This shepherding Psalm of David's, perhaps the most well-known of the Psalms, from funerals to memorization, shows us a very simple, yet profound word picture of our relationship to God and the confidence we can have in Him. His strength, in contrast to our fears and blinding of where to go or what to do, is almighty, and we have His leading through the darkness to contentment. This is a Psalm to ready ourselves for the rough roads of life and give us assurance for the desperate challenges that lay in front of us, how we are to learn to listen to God's lead and call as He does to with care and goodness. So, we do not fall to our pride or get lost in our apathy as we pursue the goal of any Christian journey--our growing relationship with Christ in the midst of a sinful and hostile world that seeks to deceive and devour us.

### Commentary—Word and Phrase Meanings:

- *My Shepherd.* Meaning a personal leader and deliverer. A shepherd was a person whose job it was to stay with, to guard, and to care for the sheep. To feed, lead to safe pastures, give medicine, splint broken legs, round up strays, nurture and protect them from dangers and predators. This, for a Jew, was a comforting image of leading and protecting, an image that had great depth and meaning, especially for an agrarian society. Jesus comes as the Good Shepherd to rescue His lost sheep. We have gone astray and have given in to sin; He brings us back to His fold. This is also a prophecy that God will come down and personally shepherd His people, fulfilled by Christ (Psalm 23:1; Isa. 40:11; 53:6; 63: 9-12; Jer. 50:6; Ezek. 34:5; Matt. 14: 13-21; John 10:11; Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:20; James 5: 19-20). This is also a name for Jesus (Psalm 79:13, 95:7, 80:1, 100:3; Gen. 49:24; Isa. 40:11; 63:9-12; Ezek. 34:7-16, 23; John 10:11,14).
- Sheep in Scripture are usually a metaphor for people who follow God or God's people. The actual animals need continuous care, are panic driven, notoriously stubborn and stupid and can't survive on their own; we are as the sheep without God, and as Christians who refuse His precepts and direction. Sheep are totally dependent upon their caregiver, the shepherd. A sheep that gets out and lives on its own will starve because it will not go where the food is, yet will eat poisonous plants. It will hurt itself by rubbing itself to death on a tree, falling and breaking its leg, falling off a cliff, or become an easy lunch for predators. Unlike other animals, they needed help in birthing, clearing up parasites, cleaning and shearing excess fur, “wool” used as clothing as well as shelter from the rain and cold. Thus,

sheep need constant care and attention; the sheep that denies the care for any reason will inevitably die from the lack of protection. The shepherd is the one who graciously cares for the sheep in his care, even laying his life on the line against predators and rustlers. "Sheep going astray" like backsliding, refers to the nation Israel, how they tended to stray far from God's path, and how He kept disciplining and rescuing them. The person who owned the sheep had a vested interest in them and would do all it took to protect them as the family's livelihood depended on them. This is more than a metaphor; it is a call to us to heed their story lest we too go astray (Gen. 31:39; Num. 27:15-23; 1 Sam. 17:34-37; 2 Sam. 5:2; Psalm 77:20; 78: 52; 71-72; 100:3; 119:176; Isa. 40:11; 53:6; 63:11; Jer. 3:15; 50:6; Ezek. 34:1-24; Hosea-whole book; John 10:1-18).

- *I / I will / I shall.* A pledge and commitment to stand firm in faith in God no matter what. There should be no material goal greater other than our deepening relationship with Christ as Lord.
- *Lack nothing.* A sheep with a good shepherd is all they need. To find contentment in God, not complacency or defiance.
- *Makes me lie down.* A metaphor for safety of the loving, gentle care of a sheep, applied to humanity. A sheep will not lay down unless they are fed, safe from predators and other aggressive sheep, and free of flies and parasites. Just like sheep, we lie down when we are not afraid, when we are free from fear and anxiety, when we have no aggressors, when we have full stomachs, and when we have a safe place. We need these things before we are content.
- *Green pastures.* Sheep in the Levant areas (Eastern Mediterranean) had very abundant and fertile grass lands from the rain and minerals in the soil. Sheep also fed on the leftovers from the harvest. Yet, the sheep are totally helpless and dependent upon the shepherd to take them there (Num. 10:33).
- *Leads me.* As sheep need water and care, God lovingly cares for His people, and directs us where to go, if we heed His call with gratitude we will respond acceptably. Sheep also have the uncanny ability to only listen to 'their' shepherd. You can place a hundred sheep all from different herds, and they will only respond to their shepherd's voice (Psalm 37:23; Phil. 4:18).
- *Quiet / still waters.* Sheep need water and are unable to look for it and even go for it themselves. Water is needed for life, the growing and prospering of crops, even life itself, and it all comes from God. Without it, everything dies. God is our abundant supply of all we need now and forevermore (Gen. 2:10-14; Psalm 46:4; Ezek. 47:1-12; Joel 3:18; Zech. 14:8; John 4:10-14; 7:37-39).
- *Refreshes my soul / Restores.* God's faithful dealings with us, as sheep brought into a warm, safe place on a cold dangerous night. A Shepherd will spend hours searching for a lost, helpless one and joyfully carries it back to safety. Personal and tender as God is with us. Also, how God convicts and redeems us. God refreshes us and also about the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming, cleansing, and spiritual life. This new life impacts us totally, constantly, and continually to usher us into eternity. But, it is still up to us to accept that impact and let it come in contact with our application of life to God, ourselves, our environment, and others (Psalm 19:7; 60:1; Isa. 12:3; 49:5; 58:12; Jer. 2:13; Ezek. 47:1-9; Zech. 14:8; Joel 2:12; John 7:37-39; 8:24; 11:50-51; 19:19; Heb. 3).
- *Guides me.* Sheep have to be on the move, as they eat and pull up the roots of the grass and devastate the land. Also, they will get complacent and will be too difficult to lead. When they move, their feces fertilize and the land becomes rich. To grow in faith, God needs to move us too, at least out of our complacency, fears, hurts and pride.
- *Right paths / paths of righteousness.* Sheep wander and do not listen; thus, they have to be gently and sometimes aggressively led. God does the same with us. As God did with Jonah, He needs to move us away from our doubts, worries and egotism onto His plan.

- *His name's sake.* Meaning we are God's people. God seeks us; He wants to be with us, He is our protection; He is the One to whom we look for leadership (Psalm 23; 80:1; 121:5-6; Isa. 4:5-6; 49:10; Micah 7:14; John 10:11-18; Heb. 3:1; 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:4; Rev. 4:6-7).
- *Walk through the darkest valley / valley of the shadow of death.* A metaphor for darkness and despair, while yearning for a place of rest. As Job felt when all was taken from him. Also, a depiction of the rocky and steep terrain in Palestine between pastures, where you can't see ahead. As Christians, we live in a sin infested world and will not be free from danger. Also, how God can intervene in crises, and most importantly save our soul (Job. 10:21-22; 38:17; Jer. 2:6).
- *Fear no evil.* Whatever we face, we are never alone. How often we are burdened by our own fears, temptations, and pride. Then, we have others' fear and pride coming against us by the way of greed, covetousness, selfishness, indifference, uncaring and just hatefulness. Yet, in Christ, we have His goodness and grace. Thus, we gain hope and strength for the journey of life and what we are called to do.
- *Rod... staff.* The authority, discipline, security and safety tools of a shepherd. The *rod* was a club worn on the belt used to fight off attackers like predatory animals or thieves. The *staff* was a walking stick also used as a weapon, usually with a crook or hook at the end. This was used to round up the flock or direct individual sheep on where to go, the hook to pull them away from danger. How God protects and leads us where we need to go when we are not aware or may not even want to, yet it is best for us. The Lord will call us out of sin and danger, if we listen and yield to Him (1 Sam. 17:35; Ezek. 20:37).
- *Comfort me / with me.* We should never fear God's discipline, as it is to help us. Sheep are very anxious and timid animals like rabbits, and will startle and run in sheer fear into danger, unless the shepherd they know is watching over them.
- *Prepare a table.* This means God treats us like an honored guest. He gives us a banquet for our victory celebration in Him; our enemies are defeated rivals who look on in hunger. We are to feed upon God's Truth and goodness daily.
- *Anoint my head with oil.* Sheep must have oil, usually olive or flaxseed with a bit of spices and sulfur mixed in, placed on their heads to prevent blindness and parasites. Also, without oil, they will be afflicted by flies that drive them to smash their heads on rocks to rid them while causing the rest of the herd to panic and run. With medicinal oil, the sheep are calm and protected from disease. This also points to the practice of Jewish priests anointing a king with oil to show they were approved by God. Also, means the healing power of God. Oil was an essential commodity used for everything from food preparation to medicine to skin care to festivities. The richer you were, the finer oils you could afford. A good host would give out oil to their guests and anoint them on their forehead before they ate. It is not a ceremonial procedure, although it can also mean actually applying oil to the person and praying over them. This also pointed to the One God would ultimately send (Lev. 4:3; 1 Sam. 16:1-6; Psalm 89:19-21; 104:15; 105:15; Isa. 1:6; 61:1; Matt. 1:1; Mark 6:13; Luke 7:46; 10:34; John 1:35-51; 6:15; Rom. 8:31-39; 2 Cor. 12:9-f).
- *Cup overflows / brimming.* Meaning we have assurance even under stress. We have what we need in Christ, so let's drink our fill, as He offers us even more (Rom. 8:31-39; 2 Cor. 12:9).
- *Goodness / mercy and love.* We have the greatest commodity in the universe, God's redemption, love and care watching over us! We are not God's acquaintances; we are His favored honored guests, His own! God is steadfast in His love of and for us.

- *Dwell / dwelling in the house of the LORD.* A Term for the Temple of God on earth and one's devotion to God. Also, a priestly office who lived in the Temple areas. Meaning we have an intimate relationship with God by His choosing and love, to have fullness and assurance of salvation. Referring to the truth that God's presence has continually resided in and around us as special favor we have as believers. The image is as God dwelt in His Temple so He now dwells in our hearts, minds, and actions, exhibiting His faithfulness by our faithfulness. This also points to the Lord's Supper (Ex. 24:8-12; Psalm 27:4; 42; 65:4; 84; 136:1; John 14:23; Rom. 8-11; 1 Cor. 11:25; Rev. 3:20).
- *Forever.* Meaning "the length of days," as extended periods of time, as come and worship as often as you want and can. May also denote forever in prayer and our life in Him into eternity (Lam. 5:20; Matt. 22:32).

### **Devotional Thoughts and Applications:**

Sheep and shepherd are often-used words in Scripture because they denote a relationship that involves an alert, caring, concerned guide--our Lord, who is described on how He sees and cares for us. He values His loved-ones, and He leads His people and directs us to what is best. A shepherd does not lead by being harsh or the sheep will refuse to go with him; such harshness could result in death. Rather, shepherds lead and guide sheep in the right direction with gentleness; with this firm, yet gentle guiding, the sheep will follow. The sheep do this out of a need to be protected, to be led to food and water-seeking resources that they themselves cannot provide or find. As followers of Christ, we are to lead others to the precepts of His Word and character. We are to lead by being shepherds who look to our Great Shepherd (Eza. 34: 1-10; Luke 15:3-7; John 10:1-18; 21:15-17; 1 Pet. 2:25).

This passage gives to us a depiction of protection, comfort, contentment, and His Lordship. He comes to us as a Shepherd who lovingly corrals His sheep for spiritual nourishment, personal growth, and protection. He becomes our sheepfold, where those who do not belong or who desire to hurt His sheep, His people, are thwarted; His people are protected and loved. He is the God who cares, loves, and leads us to the safety of His arms. The key for us is to recognize His voice, trust in Him, and follow Him.

**Christian Life Principle:** *Good Shepherd* is a Name of Jesus; He is the One who leads, equips, and guides us--as we all desperately need. It is our call to hear His voice and trust as a good sheep does in order to be fed and not be eaten by the predators of arrogance and apathy. For us to be in the safety of faith, we not only need to be in Christ, we have to obey. This is a result of our intimate relationship with Him. We know Him, He knows us, and we do what He says. We are concerned with what concerns Him, and we act accordingly. Like sheep, we can't lead ourselves or others without being forever lost and unfed (Psalm 23; Isa. 63:11; Jer. 23:1; 31:34; Ezek. 34:6-16, 23, 31; Hos. 6:6; John 10:1-18; 16:13-15; Rom. 10:7).

### **The Essential Inductive Questions** (for more Inductive questions, see Inductive Bible Study):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

### **Additional Questions:**

1. If you can say that Christ is my Good Shephard, can you also say that *I will not want* as in worry or fear my future?
2. What causes you stress or worry? How can a real understanding of this Psalm help you?
3. What does it mean that we have a personal relationship with a personal God?
4. Do you hear His voice and know His call? What can you do better to respond to His call and not stray off?
5. What aspects of this Psalm speak to you the most and why?
6. Have you been able to look back on your life and see God's hand and lead on you?
7. What gets in the way of Jesus' leading in you?
8. How can you be better at producing milk and meat, and be a sacrifice of your praise and will to His glory?
9. How has God used you and your church to bring *other sheep* to Him?
10. What can you do to make sure you get back on the right path after you strayed?
11. What can help you with the confidence that God will lead and care for you on where you need to be?
12. What fears and distresses have you had in your relationship with God? How does this Psalm speak to you? What can you do now?