

The Reverend Theo Robinson's Sermon for April 26, 2026
Psalm 23 - "To God, We Are Family"

Grace, peace, and mercy are yours from the Triune God. Amen.

Psalm 23 is one of the most famous psalms in the world. Many people, of all walks of life, at one time or another, have heard this psalm read and can usually recite at least one line of the psalm. As Walter Brueggemann states, "The grip it has on biblical spirituality is deep and genuine."

Most people associate the psalm with one common event: a funeral. But there is so much more to this psalm than sadness and death. It is widely considered that David wrote the majority of the psalms, including Psalm 23, as a reflection on events that happened or were happening in his life at the time. Because he grew up a shepherd, many of David's writings depicted the metaphor of seeing God as a shepherd.

The definition of a shepherd's job is to care for his flock, making sure they are safe, nourished, calm, and happy at all times. However, the term "shepherd" has come to be used in a much broader way, describing leadership either of an individual or a group as well as referring to a "king whose task it is to protect and provide for the subjects of the realm." David tends to use metaphors such as "rock", "shield", and "deliverer" but by using "shepherd", someone who lives with his flock and protects it with his life, David is showing us just how intimate his relationship with God really is. So it is of no surprise that the imagery found in Psalm 23 is rich in metaphor and theology with the predominant metaphor being that of God the shepherd which flows throughout the entire psalm.

Most are quite satisfied to interpret this psalm in a way that puts the shepherd as the centre of the imagery. Christians even go as far as to say that the psalm is referring to Jesus, although the Jewish author of the psalter would not have seen it that way at all. However, Psalm 23 can be seen as being written from the vantage point of the sheep, instead of the shepherd. Examining verses 1 through 3, you can see that David thought of God as his protector, provider, and king and knew that he would want for nothing, that he lacked nothing. David had faith that God would always provide. While a shepherd by trade, he considered himself a sheep to the shepherd God.

One of the most famous lines of Psalm 23 is verse 4a: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of death, I fear no evil." You will often hear this line recited not only at funerals, but also in movies and television shows where the person feels they are about to enter a dark or dangerous time in their life. While normally associated with the hidden powers of

death, verse 4 is imagery that turns away from the sheep and towards that of a traveller in a place where the roads were unsafe, perhaps either literally or metaphorically. While God doesn't promise an easy life empty of suffering or trials, God does promise to walk with us during troubled times, providing comfort, courage, and strength. Despite being hunted by Saul, being a womanizer, and being an all-around sinner, David is convinced that the presence of God is enough to get him through all of his trials and tribulations.

While it is quite common to say that the shepherd metaphor flows through the entire psalm, many scholars believe that in the final part of the psalm, verses 5 to 6, the image of God the shepherd switches to the image of God the host and giver of hospitality. No greater security or comfort could be obtained by a traveler in the ancient Near East than to be offered the hospitality of a home. Not only was there shelter and food, but there was also protection. By preparing a table in front of David's enemies, God was publicly announcing that no harm can come to David.

Psalm 23 is a very deep and powerful message about David's trust and faith in God. It is loaded with theology, imagery, and metaphor. So why then do we always associate the psalm with death? Why is it such a popular piece of text even to the secular world? As it turns out, the popularity of Psalm 23 is a relatively new concept, largely influenced by the Protestant imprint on North American culture. Throughout the 19th century, Psalm 23 became synonymous with North American views of death but prior to that, the psalm was not often seen, heard, or discussed. Sunday school literature often discussed death with reminders of discipleship in order to gain a good death. But Psalm 23 was not to be found. The Book of Common Prayer did not have Psalm 23 as a funeral psalm, instead listing Psalm 39 and 90. As well, prior to the Civil War, Psalm 23 was not part of popular culture such as deathbed scenes in novels. It wasn't until two decades after the war that Psalm 23 began to show up in secular culture.

Today, Psalm 23 is firmly imbedded into our culture. Even those parents with a looser hold on their Christian beliefs will teach their children the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23 in what has been called a "double summary of faith." Books, movies, songs, hymns, greeting cards, and wall plaques have immortalized this song of praise ahead of others in the collection of 150 psalms. It is short and easy for people to memorize and there are plenty of feel-good messages that can be pulled from the psalm. One message contained in the first three verses is one of affirmation of God's continued trustworthiness to provide for our growth, health, and protection. The Valley of the Shadow of Death could mean either a literal road that may contain dangers or a metaphorical road full of life and death moments that occur in our lives. In either case, the psalmist wants us to know that God will keep us safe not by deflecting trouble from our paths but instead by journeying with us. The second half of the psalm has an overlying message of faith, trust, and the promise

of everlasting life. A banquet set in front of your enemies shows faith in God's protection and that by staying with God, a person will experience all of God's love and mercy for all eternity.

Ultimately, when you sit back and listen to Psalm 23, you can find comfort in the shepherd imagery, knowing that if you stay with God the shepherd you will be forever safe.

Shepherds are tasked with taking care of large herds of sheep, of making sure they stay alive, are fed, and are brought safely to their place of grazing, and then home again, of course. And, if even one sheep wanders off and gets lost, the shepherd will go and find that one sheep, trusting that the herd will take care of themselves for a few moments. To the shepherd, the sheep are family. The image of the shepherd can be used to describe our relationship with God. God tends to all people, cares for us, makes sure we have what we need, ensures we know we are loved, and will find us if we get lost. To God, we are family.

And that is good news, indeed. Amen.