

Psalms 23:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Analysis

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. This beloved opening of Scripture's most famous psalm establishes a profound metaphor that shapes the entire poem. In six Hebrew words (יהוה רועי לא אחותר/Yahweh ro'i lo echsar), David declares complete sufficiency in God's care.

"The LORD" (יהוה/Yahweh) uses God's covenant name—the personal name revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). This isn't a generic deity but Israel's covenant-keeping God who has bound Himself to His people in faithful love. The use of the divine name emphasizes personal relationship.

"My shepherd" (רועי/ro'i) is deeply personal—not "a shepherd" or even "the shepherd" but "MY shepherd." The possessive pronoun transforms this from theological abstraction to intimate reality. David, himself a shepherd, knew the role's demands: constant vigilance, provision, protection, guidance, intimate knowledge of each sheep.

In ancient Near Eastern culture, shepherd imagery applied to both kings and deities. Kings were called shepherds of their people (2 Samuel 5:2; Jeremiah 23:1-4). Mesopotamian rulers bore titles like "shepherd of the people." Yet often these human shepherds failed, exploited, or abandoned their flocks. Against failed human leadership, David declares: Yahweh is my shepherd—the one who doesn't fail.

"I shall not want" (לא אחותר/lo echsar) is the psalm's thesis statement. Chasar means to lack, be in need, be deficient. The imperfect tense indicates future

certainty: "I will not lack." This isn't prosperity gospel—David knew hardship, persecution, exile. Rather, it's confidence that God provides what we truly need for life and godliness.

The remainder of Psalm 23 unpacks this thesis: green pastures (provision), still waters (peace), restoration (renewal), right paths (guidance), valley of shadow (presence in suffering), table before enemies (vindication), anointing (blessing), goodness and mercy (daily grace), dwelling in God's house forever (eternal security).

Historical Context

David likely wrote this psalm during his shepherd years before becoming king, or perhaps later, reflecting on those formative experiences. As a shepherd in Bethlehem's fields, David personally knew the dangers: wild animals (he killed lions and bears, 1 Samuel 17:34-37), thieves, terrain hazards, weather extremes, and the constant need for water and pasture.

Ancient Near Eastern shepherding was demanding. Unlike modern industrial farming, shepherds lived with their flocks, knew each sheep individually, risked their lives for protection, and bore responsibility for every loss. Palestinian terrain—rocky, dry, with scarce water—made the shepherd's task even more critical.

The shepherd metaphor appears throughout Scripture. Jacob describes God as "the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel" (Genesis 49:24). Psalm 80:1 calls God "Shepherd of Israel." Isaiah 40:11 portrays God gathering lambs in His arms. Ezekiel 34 indicts Israel's failed shepherds and promises God will shepherd His people directly.

For Israel, constantly vulnerable to powerful neighbors and often suffering under corrupt leadership, the image of God as shepherd offered profound comfort. Human kings failed, but Yahweh remains faithful. Political powers threatened, but God protects. Economic hardship loomed, but God provides.

Jesus explicitly identified Himself with this imagery: "I am the good shepherd"

(John 10:11, 14). He contrasts Himself with hired hands who flee when wolves come. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep, lays down His life for them, and ensures none are lost (John 10:28).

Early Christians, facing persecution and martyrdom, found comfort in Psalm 23. Catacomb art frequently depicts Christ as shepherd. The psalm was (and remains) read at funerals, the "valley of the shadow of death" speaking to believers' ultimate confidence: even death cannot separate from the Shepherd's care.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 – Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. What does it mean practically that the LORD is 'my shepherd' (personal relationship) rather than just 'the shepherd' (general truth)?
2. How does understanding the historical realities of shepherding in ancient Palestine deepen appreciation for this metaphor?
3. In what ways might we 'want' (lack) things God hasn't provided, and how does this verse address the difference between wants and true needs?
4. How does Jesus's identification as the 'good shepherd' who lays down His life for the sheep fulfill and expand Psalm 23's imagery?
5. What experiences in your life have proven God's shepherding care, and how does remembering these strengthen faith during current challenges?

Interlinear Text

אֲחַסְרָה	לֹא	רַעַי	יְהִי	הָ
The LORD	is my shepherd	H3808	I shall not want	

Additional Cross-References

Philippians 4:19 (Parallel theme): But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

John 10:11 (Parallel theme): I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

Isaiah 40:11 (Parallel theme): He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

John 10:14 (Parallel theme): I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.

Revelation 7:17 (Parallel theme): For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

Matthew 6:33 (Parallel theme): But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

1 Peter 2:25 (Parallel theme): For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

1 Peter 5:4 (Parallel theme): And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

Psalms 84:11 (References Lord): For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.

Romans 8:32 (Parallel theme): He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?