

THE CHARACTER OF GOD: PSALM 23

Focus Idea: God's character is marked with tenderness and affection for his people.

The Context: Psalm 23 is one of 150 worship poems that shaped the religious life of the ancient Israelites. These poems – many of them were probably set to music – served as devotions, royal anthems, and praise choruses for assembled worshipers. The psalms are at times celebratory, at other times mournful, and on a few occasions depict anger and frustration. They are the honest and earnest expressions of the faith of the nation.

The Characters: The 23rd Psalm is one of dozens of poems and sonnets authored by David, the last of eight sons born to a Bethlehem shepherd named Jesse. In a moving story we'll revisit later, God bypassed each of the older brothers and designated David – at the time, just a child out minding his father's flocks – to be the next king over Israel (1 Samuel 16).

David's big break occurred when Jesse sent David to the battlefield to bring wartime provisions to David's older brothers. When David saw the enemy champion - a Philistine giant named Goliath - taunting God's people, David was filled with passion and determined to do war with the mighty man. Despite the efforts of the Israelite leaders (and his older brothers) to dissuade him, David was resolute, believing that his experiences as a shepherd had prepared him for this moment. Striding forward with only his shepherd's sling and a few stones, he struck the giant in the forehead and won a great battle for Israel.

David's success on the battlefield propelled him into a military and political career that would ultimately mark him as the greatest king in the history of Israel.

The Core: In Psalm 23, David uses images and icons from his experience as a shepherd to compose a poem about the character of his God.

David's years of shepherding taught him about the vulnerabilities of the flock and the importance of a tender and attentive shepherd to care for them. His time as a political leader surely led him to draw some comparisons between the flocks and the people that he governed; both goats and people needed a lot of supervision!

David describes God as the only One who can provide for all that he requires (vs. 1). God meets the material needs of his people (vs. 2-3) and is a trustworthy and careful guide through life (vs. 3-4). No doubt David, as he penned out these lyrics about "the right path", was picturing his wayward lambs, constantly veering off-course!

But God wasn't only a provider, he was also a protector. Like sheep surrounded by hungry carnivores, David understood that he had personal enemies. But God's loving hand of protection – symbolized by the shepherd's sturdy staff – was so strong about him that David could enjoy a banquet feast in the presence of his opponents.

In the end, David knew that his ultimate needs were spiritual and eternal, and he understands that the care that God provides in this life would continue past the grave, and that he would dwell in the house of the Lord forever (vs. 6).