

## Psalm 23 and the Biblical Theology of God the Shepherd-Warrior-King

### *The Shepherd-King of Ps 23*



**Psalm 23:1-6** A psalm of David.

The LORD is my shepherd,

I shall not be in want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the valley  
of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence  
of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

#### **a) Introduction**

##### **(1) Historical context**

This most famous of OT psalms belongs to the time of Absalom's rebellion (usurpation) in the time when David retreated over the Kidron and the Mt of Olives into the plains of the wilderness (cf. 4:8; 3:7; 27:4).

David's life was a life lived under the Lordship of God. David loved the Lord with all his heart. David the warrior was also David Israel's singer of songs, the greatest poet of their entire history. Ps 23 is undoubtedly the most famous poem/song in the world.

In our era, poets are generally seen as the defeated beatniks of a lazy and lost generation. Nevertheless, historically poets and poetry were seen as the mainstay of civilization, giving voice to the deepest longings and hopes of the human heart. They also played a very significant role in wars and preparing people's hearts with courage to face death and destruction for the right. Emboldened with truth stated poetically, the heart could be strengthened in ways strait prose can never do. To test this idea, just try and put any of the OT psalms into conversational prose! The same goes for our songs, hymns, and spiritual songs: not only have they historically provided comfort and strength to countless millions of believers, they also have *prepared them for the spiritual battle*. Thus, it is a historical travesty that many in our generation dismiss the great hymns and songs of the past, and replace them with soupy, touchy-feely, happy-clappy ditties lacking blood, sweat, and tears; lacking the themes of death and sorrow, thus truly lacking real comfort and encouragement. Indeed, such sentimentalism provides nothing for the *battle raging around us and against us!*

This is not so with any of the OT psalms, and certainly not for any of David's psalms. David's psalms must be in light of his life, for it is there that they speak most clearly of his Lord, his Shepherd and Warrior-King. David lived the Lordship of God, he trusted in God for his life in the face of unmanageable, indeed *impossible*, opposition from within and without. But, more importantly, we meet a man who completely trusted in God for his *redemption*. One that David's psalms speak most emphatically to is the spiritual reality of being a sinner in need of a Savior. We too often remove the psalms from this historical context and squeeze them into what some call "*temporal faith*." That is, we use the psalms to get temporal encouragement in the face of economic, personal, and national hardships. And, indeed, they give us much of that kind of faith. But, taken thus far, they were never intended to leave us there: I believe that the psalms universally present us with the much more important spiritual message of the *gospel of redemption*. As we all know, David's life was a *living* testimony to that gospel, demonstrating in vivid colors the unmerited grace of God. b

even more important than that is David's *proclamation* of the gospel which redeemed his life. (The notion that we witness only by our life and not by our words is utterly overturned by the Bible). David consistently and extensively proclaims the gospel through his psalms.

Psalm 23 is undoubtedly the most well known psalm in the entire world. Isn't that remarkable? There are various reasons for that, primarily because of its simplistic beauty and literary quality. It is a perfect length to memorize, and its shepherd and royal imagery speaks across all cultures and languages. It addresses succinctly the temporal fears of all humans in all times. It expresses succinctly all human longings for peace and righteousness and hope and protection and comfort and goodness, known to all humans in all times. It is also ironically a comfort to many who do not even profess faith in God or the gospel.

Thus, I believe that this confirms my BT interpretation that this psalm essentially conveys the Edenic, paradisal, heavenly picture of a *restored relationship* with God. That relationship is what all creation groans in travail for; all humans are trapped in the downward death-cycle apart from God the creator.

The shepherd-king imagery of the Bible often is found in contexts that assume God as Creator. This is true of many OT psalms, OT prophets, proverbs, etc. We call this creation theology as the backdrop to redemption-theology. In the Bible, God the Creator is always God the Redeemer.

### **(2) Literary context**

The immediate literary context of psalms does not always give us any concrete keys to a particular psalm, but it is generally helpful to assume that the arrangement of the psalms may have originally held significance, and we may get hints at that intention sometimes. To consider the *immediate context* also does not mean that there are not many other psalms that correspond in some way with the psalm being considered (as discussed for example above regarding shepherd and kingly imagery). In the case of Ps 23, it is compelling to consider the significance of psalm 22 preceding, in which the death of the Messiah is portrayed in such vivid clarity (many centuries before the fact.). With NT hindsight, we understand that the shepherd-king would die on behalf his people. His finished work by his death brought restoration and *righteousness* to his people.

The immediate, literary context of Ps 23 is one rich in suffering-shepherd and royal-king imagery. Consider Ps 24 following, which affirms the dominion of the Lord over all the earth, the eternal security of all believers, and the fact that it is the Lord WHO IS THE KING OF GLORY. The one who dies will be delivered from death, as will his brothers (Ps 22:22), and all the ends of the earth will turn to the Lord, for *dominion belongs to the Lord* (22:27-28). The human king sings of the Divine King who is both a shepherd and a victorious warrior.

### **(3) The redeemed believer**

This psalm is not only about "comfort in affliction" or encouragement in the face of death; it is a profound portrayal of the *spiritual position* of the true believer in God his Shepherd and King. As such, it provides us with one of the most beautiful psalms of comfort to all true believers.

Redemption is all of God. There are no human works, there is no deed nor character good enough to accomplish redemption. There is no church sacrament, there is no water baptism, there is neither communion nor confession to the priest that is good enough to create a restored relationship with God for sinful humans! The reason this psalm has always been such a comfort to believers is this fact: redemption is all of God. There is complete rest in God alone, complete trust in God alone, and complete assurance in God alone. This is not just "assurance" in some emotional sense; it is absolute *assurance* that God is the one who has accomplished redemption for us. The believer in psalm 23 is in a perfectly *secure relationship* with God, he has nothing to fear for he has placed all his hope and trust in God alone. This involves complete resignation to God, complete surrender of the psalmist's righteousness, his fears, his doubt, his entire life.

It is too easy to take this psalm literally, thus failing to understand its redemptive-historical profundity: the Lord is indeed concerned with our daily needs, comforts, and rest of soul, but that is not what this psalm is primarily about. I believe it is primarily about the *spiritual realities* of redemption given to all true believers. As such, it also contains Messianic themes for all believers. As such, it thus gives all believers comfort and joy and encouragement in the midst of suffering, death, darkness, and want. But the comfort to the believer flows from God; it is dependent on the spiritual realities of those who belong to the Lord.

This psalm is as widely quoted among unbelievers in the same way Jesus' beatitudes in Mtt 5 are often quoted, and for the same wrong reasons: it is often presumed that they can take comfort that their life will go well, and that they will

experience the literal, or temporal, blessings described in the psalm, as they suppose they will experience the temporal blessings described in the beatitudes, such as “peace” and “comfort.” They could not be more wrong, for both the beatitudes and psalm 23 describe the *relationship of the redeemed to their Lord*, and they have nothing to do with general encouragement or comfort for those who do not belong to him.

### b) The Lord is David's Shepherd

מָנוּמָר לְדוֹד יְהוָה רֶשֶׁת לֹא אַחֲרֵי WTT  
Psalm 23:1 A psalm of David.

The LORD (יהָה) is my shepherd,  
I shall not be in want.

Also see Ps 34:10 The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

Creation theology is the backdrop to redemption theology: the relationship that David assumes with God is that as Creator and Master of the universe, he can trust God as a sheep trusts his shepherd. Even more so in his case, for his Shepherd is the Lord God who created all things. That is, the only way that David could affirm that his Shepherd would keep him from want, is that he assumed that his shepherd *could keep him from want*. And there is only One who has such dominion over all creation. The divine character of the Shepherd is evident in all of the psalm, derivative from David’s affirmations of God’s sovereignty in providing, restoring-redeeming soul, guiding in righteousness, being present with him in all places (even in death), always present to comfort, delivering from enemies, as well as being covenantally faithful in blessings, love, and goodness. The lacking of “want” is an allusion to earlier Israelite history, particularly the Exodus and wanderings where God promised that they would *lack nothing* there and in the land of the promise.<sup>1</sup> This gives covenantal significance to the imagery alluded to in Ps 23:

Deut 2:7 The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything.

Deut 8:9 a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

This imagery also is used to warn Israel of the consequences of disobedience:

Deut 28:48 therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the LORD sends against you. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you.

Most importantly, however, is David’s assumption that his Shepherd was also his Redeemer. That is, that he would not be *in want* is not simply about temporal needs but about his eternal destiny. That David will not lack what he needs temporally cannot be the only thing he means here, for this psalm is not just about David; it is about his God – the covenant-Lord (יהָה). Surely, David is not just making a claim that he will never suffer any temporal wants or needs! Consider his life; it was full of abasing and abounding temporally, financially, personally, socially, and politically. Further to the idea of redemption theology, David uses the *covenantal name* of God: YHWH, the Lord – “I AM that I AM.” This

<sup>1</sup> BDB -- 3300 חָסֵר (page 341) (Strong 2637) † חָסֵר vb. lack, need, be lacking, decrease (v. Lag:BN 143; NH חָסֵר cause to lack or fail, diminish (act.), and deriv.; Aram. חָסֵר, <\*>, want, lack, and deriv., cf. Ph. חָסֵר, v. מִחְסָר infr.; Ar. <\*> remove, strip off, disappear, retire (of water), fail (of sight), etc.; perh. also Eth. <\*> be inferior, worthless, diminished Di:590 and deriv.) — Qal Pf. 3 ms. חָסֵר Dt 2:7; 3 pl. חָסָר Ne 9:21; 1 pl. חָסְרִינוּ Je 44:18; Impf. חָסֵר Dt 15:8 + 2 t.; חָסֵר Pr 31:11 Ec 9:8; 3 fs. חָסֵר 1 K 17:14 Pr 13:25; 2 ms. חָסֵר Dt 8:9; 1 s. חָסֵר Psalm 23:1; pl. חָסָר Psalm 34:11 Ez 4:17; חָסֵר Gn 8:3; נִזְקָרְנוּ Gn 18:28; Inf. cstr. חָסֵר Pr 10:21 Ew:§ 238 a, cf. Ges:§ 45. 1 a; abs. חָסֵר Gn 8:5; Pt. חָסֵר 1 K 11:22 Ec 10:3 (v. חָסֵר infr.); — 1. lack: a. c. acc. Gn 18:28 (J) perchance the fifty righteous lack five, Dt 2:7 thou hast not lacked anything, 8:9 Je 44:18 1 K 11:22 Ez 4:17 Psalm 34:11 Pr 31:11, cf. also בְּחָסֵר Pr 10:21 by lacking intelligence (sense), (Di puts here Dt 15:8, v. infr.) b. abs. be in want, want Psalm 23:1 Pr 13:25 Ne 9:21. 2. be lacking, אָשֵׁר יְחִידָה Dt 15:8 his lack (i.e. thing needed), which is lacking to him (possible also is, which he lacks for himself, so Di, v. supr.); בְּחָסֵר Ec 9:8 oil on thy head let it not be lacking; v. also abs. Is 51:14 Ct 7:3, and לְבָזָב Ec 10:3 his sense is lacking; of jar of oil 1 K 17:14; 17:16 (abs.) by meton. for the oil itself (cf. || כָּלָה be consumed, exhausted). 3. diminish, decrease, of waters Gn 8:3 (P), cf. v:5 (P), waters continually diminished (v. הַלְׁזָה supr. p. 233:b). Pi. cause to lack, c. acc. pers., Impf. 2 ms. sf. וְמַחְסֵר אֲתִינְגָּשִׂי מִטוֹבָה Ec 4:8 for whom am I labouring and depriving myself of good things? Hiph. Pf. הַחֲסִיר Ex 16:18; Impf. תִּחְסִיר Is 32:6; — cause to be lacking, fail, c. acc. rei. Is 32:6; the drink of the thirsty he causeth to fail (|| לְהַרְקִיךְ נֶפֶשׁ קָעֵב); abs. Ex 16:18 (P), he that gathered little caused no lack.

was the very personal name given to Moses as the seal of God's covenant promises. The Lord *is*; he is the God of all creation, the only God of redemption.



Ancient cylinder seal of shepherd and sheep<sup>2</sup>

David's רֶשֶׁת from III. רָעָה (Aram. רְעֵא) (apx 186 verses contain various forms)-- Shepherd is the Shepherd of all God's people (words regarding shepherds are found some 110x in the Bible):

Gen 48:15 Then he blessed Joseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has

been my shepherd all my life to this day,

Ezek 34:12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

Isa 40:11 He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Ps 28:9 Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever.

Hos 4:16 The Israelites are stubborn, like a stubborn heifer. How then can the LORD pasture them like lambs

This same Shepherd would come to redeem his people:

Ezek 34:23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.

The Shepherd of the OT declares himself in Jesus:

Jn 10:11-16 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. <sup>13</sup> The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-- and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."



What David affirms is that God his Shepherd will not deprive him of what he *truly* needs: the Hebrew word conveys a sense of *deprivation*, that his Shepherd will not withhold from him, or *deprive him*, of what he truly needs. In other words, this idea of "lack of want" transcends temporal provision. This I believe is made plain in what follows, which is essentially his exposition of his initial proclamation that he *shall not be in want*. We find out precisely what he means by this affirmation in the rest of the psalm, as follows:

**בְּנֹאֹת דְּשָׂא יַרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מַיִּם מִנְחֹות יִנְהַלְנִי:**<sup>2</sup>  
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,

To take this verse as strictly temporal-literal would reduce it to a comical assertion, for though the imagery evokes an Edenic longing for a place of peace and rest in a garden setting, it cannot possibly be only about such universal temporal longings. Indeed, as in his proclamation that he *shall not be in want*, David is describing the true rest and peace his soul longs for. Indeed, in this sense the longing for such peace affirms the universal *spiritual longing* for true peace of heart, soul, and mind. This is of course *pictured* here in the poetic (Edenic) imagery of green pastures and quiet waters, but this imagery is metaphoric of the *spiritual reality* he knows with God, a true relationship, a true peace, a true freedom from

<sup>2</sup> "Sheep, Shepherds," IVP Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, p.

deprivation. The deep desire of all people to return to the *garden*, to the waters of peace, speaks of our need for redemption, our need for restoration to God's presence and fellowship. (I would qualify this assertion by adding that the Edenic themes may also include the hope for the final restoration-rest he will find in the new creation of the physical earth. In this case, David could have been speaking prophetically, or foreshadowing, of what was to come.)

Importantly, it is God who does this: it is his Shepherd who *causes him to lie down* (וַיַּרְבִּיאֵנִי, Hiphil imperfect). This lying down is obviously not simply about sleeping, though it can include the kind of assurance in God that he might have when he does sleep. It is the Lord who has himself made it possible for David to find true rest beside streams of water. The Lord is the one who *leads him* (וַיַּהֲלֹלֵנִי, Piel impf conveys the intensive aspect, stressing God who does this leading).

Water is a metaphor for a variety of things in the Bible (over 600 references), and in this case I believe it portrays well-being of soul that pictures a *rest from striving* and peace of heart. This describes the soul at peace with God. Remember also that Adam and Eve enjoyed in Eden the rivers that watered their garden-paradise. In contrast, *unstill* water would have brought memories of the Flood of judgment on the world. We especially find allusions of water to the all-defining experience in Israel's history: the Exodus, which involved both deliverance through water (Red Sea and Jordan River later) and deliverance *by water* (water from the rock). Water was the most fundamental symbol for life in the A.N.E., for water was essential to basic survival, *drought* being the worst fear of all ancient peoples, drought meaning *death*.

Gen 1:2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

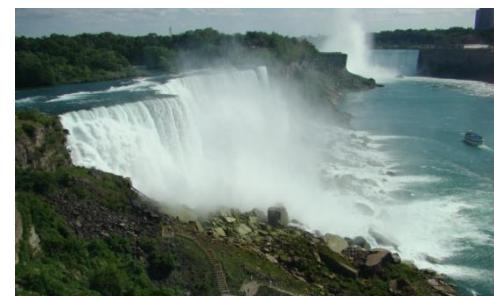
Ps 42:7 Deep calls to deep  
in the roar of your waterfalls;  
all your waves and breakers  
have swept over me.

Ps 104:13-16 He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;  
the earth is satisfied by the fruit of his work.

14 He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate —  
bringing forth food from the earth:

15 wine that gladdens the heart of man,  
oil to make his face shine,  
and bread that sustains his heart.

16 The trees of the LORD are well watered,  
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.



In the NT, water pictures final redemption in the new heaven and new earth:

Rev 22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal,  
flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb

In Ps 23, this *creation* imagery also implies that God is the one who *makes* the pastures green and creates the still waters. This imagery is intended to communicate *redemption*-theology about the state of his soul and life before God. This is developed explicitly in the next verse:

<sup>3</sup> נֶפֶשִׁי יִשָּׂבֵב יְנַחֵנִי בְּמַעֲגָלִי־צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:  
3 he restores my soul.  
He guides me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.



**יִשָּׂבֵב** - *Restore* relates to the idea of *returning* and here is a third m sing Piel (Polel?) imperfect, an *intensive* form of the verb (stressing God's initiative, the initial verbs are all 3 masc sing verbs: He restores --; He causes me to lie down --; He leads me --; **וַיַּרְבִּיאֵנִי**; He restores --; **וַיַּהֲלֹלֵנִי**). Restoration of his soul is the heartbeat of this psalm, and this is a



spiritual concept, not a spatial-temporal concept. I believe that this is confirmed with what the Lord does for him after restoring his soul: he guides him in *righteousness* (צֶדֶק). Here is the gospel of grace: God restores the soul to himself and guides the soul in his righteousness. Righteousness in the OT often addresses the moral/ethical righteousness of human character and life, but I believe in this context it may be understood with reference to the righteousness of God himself. If that is the case, then it may correspond with the gospel theme of the need for the righteousness of God that can only be found when he guides us onto its path. That is, righteousness for the believer is only possible through God himself.

*There are only two paths:* righteousness and life or unrighteousness and death, wisdom or folly, light or darkness, broad and narrow (see p. Error! Bookmark not defined.f.)

Importantly, we also see here the *covenant* idea, relating to the covenantal name of YHWH, *for his name's sake*.

Exod 34:5-6 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. 6 And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,

That is, the focus is not on David, this Psalm is not about David in his need, it is about the Lord who redeems and saves and preserves David. God's name is at stake in this history of redemption, thus the Lord will be faithful in his covenant promise to redeem him. The name of YHWH is the name of God, and the name is central to God's purposes of redemption. The sanctuary was to be the place of his name. The name is the identification of who God is and what he does. Variations on this motif: בָשְׂמֵי יְהוָה and אֶת־שְׁמָיו and בָשֵׂם יְהוָה and אֶת־שְׁמָנוֹ. The Name correlates with YHWH's glorious presence in heaven and in the sanctuary. The place he puts his name is to be holy and protected. That place would be in the Most Holy Place where atonement was required to enter his presence before his law. The Lord puts his name there (very poetically) forever: לְשֻׁוּם־שְׁמֵי שֵׁם עַד־עוֹלָם:

1 Ki 9:3 The LORD said to him: "I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.

That David says the Lord does these things *for his name sake* ("on account of his name"), indicates the importance of the personal quality of the Lord's relationship to believing Israel and all of his people. He is the personal covenanting God who takes his name in relationship to his redeemed people with utmost seriousness.

The same is true of the NT:

Jn 14:14 You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

Jn 16:24 Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

Acts 15:17 that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things

David's soul was in danger, not just his physical life, and David understands that the Lord himself will do the restoring and the guiding. To understand this in light of NT revelation: God is the one who *justifies* and *sanctifies*, God restores through regeneration and guides/leads through sanctification in the paths of righteousness. The Hebrew word here for *lead* is also *causative* (Hiphil impf).

David's temporal-spatial walk is not one free of danger or darkness or suffering. Indeed, his next description of his walk has comforted many millions of believers who have faced the shadow-lands of this life. Even though his walk in the paths of righteousness may include valleys of shadows, and even death itself, he has confidence that he has nothing to fear precisely because his Shepherd is guiding him in the paths of righteousness. His *walk* will even continue beyond death!

<sup>4</sup> גַם כִּי־אָלֶךְ בְּנֵיא צְלָמוֹת לְאָירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עֲמָדִי שְׁבָטָךְ וְמִשְׁעַנְתָּךְ הַמָּה יְנַחֲמֵנִי:

4 Even though I walk  
through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.



Death is assumed in the phrase **צלמות**, which is often assumed to be a combination of *shadows* and *death*. Nevertheless, it may more accurately mean “deep darkness.”<sup>3</sup>

“Shadows are never an image of sinister darkness in the Bible.”<sup>4</sup>

(left) The Valley of the Shadow of Death by George Inness

Nevertheless, the Bible does present this darkness as opposite to light, and thus implying fear or sorrow. Life without light is a living death:

Job 3:4-5 That day—may it turn to darkness;  
may God above not care about it;  
may no light shine upon it.  
5 May darkness and deep shadow  
claim it once more;  
may a cloud settle over it;  
may blackness overwhelm its light.  
Job 12:22 He reveals the deep things of darkness and brings  
deep shadows into the light.  
Job 10:20-22 Are not my few days almost over?  
Turn away from me so I can have a moment’s joy 21 before I  
go to the place of no return,  
to the land of gloom and deep shadow,  
22 to the land of deepest night,  
of deep shadow and disorder,  
where even the light is like darkness.”  
Job 24:17 For all of them, deep darkness is their morning;  
they make friends with the terrors of darkness.  
Amos 5:8 he who made the Pleiades and Orion,  
who turns blackness into dawn  
and darkens day into night,  
who calls for the waters of the sea  
and pours them out over the face of the land— the LORD is  
his name—



(above)c. 1568, Pieter Bruegel, Seesturm

The valley of *darkness* may hint at death, but it may allude as much to *this life*. Though David walks in the paths of righteousness, he walks in this world of shadowy darkness and dangers, yet without spiritual death and fear. This contrasts with those who are not redeemed, as described in the NT:

Heb 2<sup>14</sup> Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—<sup>15</sup> and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.<sup>16</sup> For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. <sup>17</sup> For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every

<sup>3</sup> BDB 8173 צָלָמֹת (page 853) (Strong 6757)† **צָלָמֹת** n. [m.] death-shadow, deep shadow, poet. (prob. = צְלָה + מַתָּה, LXX. (usu.) σκιὰ θανάτου, cf. SyrVer Vulgate, so Thes Schwally:Leben n. d. Tode, 194, v. esp. Nö:ZAW xvii (1897), 183 ff.; Ew Br and most mod. (after older comm.) rd. **צָלָמֹת** darkness, deep darkness, cp. Ar. <\*> IV, As. [s\alāmu], Eth. <\*> be black, dark); —death-shadow, oft. 1. etc., and opp. בָּקָר etc. 2. = deep shadow, darkness (cf. אֲזֵן אֶל, חַדְקָה etc., and opp. בָּקָר). 1. = deep shadow, darkness (cf. אֲזֵן אֶל, חַדְקָה etc., and opp. בָּקָר). 2. fig. a. of distress Je 13:16 Psalm 107:10; 107:14 ; Is 9:1. b. of extreme danger Je 2:6 Psalm 23:4 44:20. 3. characterizing world of the dead, אָרֶן חַדְקָה וְזִין אֲזֵן צָלָמֹת (LXX πυλώρων δὲ ἄδου; || אָרֶן חַדְקָה וְזִין אֲזֵן צָלָמֹת).

<sup>4</sup> Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, p. 780.

way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.<sup>18</sup> Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Matt 4:16 the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

Lu 1:79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

Fear/darkness. Those held in bondage to their fear of death, are those who are not redeemed, who are lost in their sin. David had no fear because his Creator-Redeemer was *with him*. He was redeemed by God. David is *not* suggesting that he will not suffer in this life. Yet he does affirm that evil is not able to ultimately harm him, for he is not just addressing temporal concerns of his physical life, his kingship, nor his health or finances. He is speaking of the confidence he has that the Lord has redeemed and restored him and that *the Lord is present with him*. The latter assertion of God's presence is fundamental to all the hope of the covenant promises to Israel: the frequently repeated promise of God, "I will be your God, and you will be my people" is the central promise of redemption to God's people, and that redemption is essentially restoration to the holy **presence** of God, the Lord.

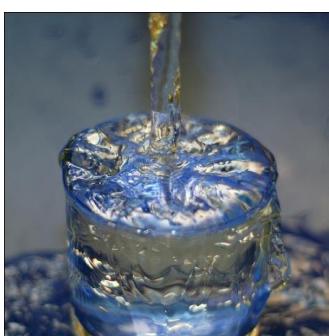
*Comfort me:* יְנַחֲמָנִי, is the last word of the phrase and is the intensive form of the verb, Piel imperfect.<sup>5</sup> The Lord is David's Shepherd precisely because the Lord is present with him in the midst of life's challenges: thus David knows the *comfort* that God is with him, in relation to him, indeed redeeming and sanctifying him. Importantly, David speaks directly to his Lord, confirming the interpretation that this is about *personal redemption*: David *knows* his shepherd well enough to address him directly here.

Consider also the creation-theology implicit in the metaphor of *valleys*, for the Lord is the one who created the valleys. As David affirms God the Creator of the place of green pastures and still waters in v. 2, he likewise assumes God is creator of the valleys in vs. 4. Yet, he is does not mean to leave us there: he wants us to understand this in spiritual terms that God is the one who promised a fertile land of fruitfulness. And this land was a but a picture of the much bigger promise of redemption. Thus, on the paths of redemption-righteousness, David had no fear of shadows or death for he knew that the Lord who created the universe also redeemed him, and would also preserve him.

The shepherd would use his *rod and staff* to bring this about (see fn. 5. It is interesting that the image of the Shepherd's rod ends the first section of the psalm that ends with royal, kingly imagery, since the rod often means the king's scepter). If the Creator-God was with him, and if the Redeemer-God had redeemed him, he had nothing to fear in the battles of life and death. Once again, this is about God, not David. It is a strong faith-affirmation that God as Lord is the Creator and Redeemer who loves and protects like a Shepherd and a King (as we see next in vv. 5-6).

### c) David's Shepherd is David's King

The second part of the psalm introduces a dramatic shift of imagery from describing the Lord as his Shepherd to describing the Lord as his King:



שְׁלֹחַ נָתַן צְרֵרִי דְשֻׁנָּת בְּשָׁמָן רָאשִׁי כּוֹסִי רְוִיהָה:  
תְּעַרְךָ לִפְנֵי<sup>5</sup>

5 You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.



David now presents himself as the royal guest of the Royal

<sup>5</sup> The comfort of the Lord for David comes from the Lord's "rod." The rod in the OT has a range of meanings, many of which refer to the scepter the king wields for guiding the nation and protecting them against enemies. Indeed, the rod used metaphorically in Prov "spare the rod" is not the same rod described in some texts that indicate physical punishment (as when the slave dies by a rod in Ex 21:20), since any such rod would likely kill a child. Rather, it seems better to understand the kind of rod in Prov 13:24 correlating with this positive image of comfort in guidance, counting the sheep, protection, and discipline (not necessarily a figure of primarily punishment, as it seems in Prov 22:15; 23:13-14). The same is seen in Micah 7:14 – "Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, which lives by itself in a forest, in fertile pasturelands. Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in days long ago."

See BDB (2314a) שֶׁבֶט (shēbet) Rod, staff, scepter, tribe. This noun commonly denotes a rod. It was used for beating cumin (Isa 28:27), as a weapon (2Sam 23:21), and as a shepherd's implement either to muster or count sheep (Lev 27:32; Ezek 20:37), or to protect them (Psa 23:4; Mic 7:14). In Psa 23:4 it is used metaphorically of the Lord's protection of his servant as he walks in paths of righteousness.

Host, the King. He need not explain to us that this King is the same as his Shepherd, nor that this King is the same as his God, for that is plainly assumed in the context.

It is widely assumed that the background to this table and dinner imagery, as well as anointing the head oil,<sup>6</sup> is the ancient practice of sealing a covenant with a meal.<sup>7</sup> If that is the case, it holds great significance for the Davidic covenant that God made with David.

2 Sam 7:9-12 I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. 10 And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning 11 and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies. "The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: 12 When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom.

This covenant included deliverance from David's enemies, as mentioned in Ps 23:5. David seems to have in mind here *temporal victory* over his human enemies in fulfilling the divinely appointed *ban* on those still living in the land, especially the Philistines (or Absalom?). Nevertheless, as in the previous verses, David does not want us to stop there with temporal ideas, but rather he wants us to understand the spiritual import of his assertion: God who promised the land to Israel, had redeemed Israel, was the same God David claimed was fulfilling his covenant promise to him, thus giving it great spiritual significance in the history of redemption. The promise to David was not just about his own progeny and kingdom, but rather it pointed to the eternal King, the eternal promise of redemption:

2 Sam 7:13-16 He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. 15 But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. 16 Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."

Consider David's prayer in response to God's promise:

2 Sam 7:22-29 "How great you are, O Sovereign LORD! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears. 23 And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? 24 You have established your people Israel as your very own forever, and you, O LORD, have become their God. 25 "And now, LORD God, keep forever the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house. Do as you promised, 26 so that your name will be great forever. Then men will say, 'The LORD Almighty is God over Israel!' And the house of your servant David will be established before you. 27 "O LORD Almighty, God of Israel, you have revealed this to your servant, saying, 'I will build a house for you.' So your servant has found courage to offer you this prayer. 28 O Sovereign LORD, you are God! Your words are trustworthy, and you have promised these good things to your servant. 29 Now be pleased to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue forever in your sight; for you, O Sovereign LORD, have spoken, and with your blessing the house of your servant will be blessed forever."



If we consider the Lord's promise to David as background to Ps 23, then his concluding claim makes good sense:

<sup>6</sup> In this context it is significant that the motif of anointing is used, for it graphically pictures the goodness of God bestowed on his people (cf. the motif metaphor of fullness of sap in Ps 92:14).

See BDB 2237 נִזְבֵּן (Strong 1878) to make fat, anoint. See TWOT -- The righteous man is described as a fruitful tree, "full of sap" in his old age (Psa 92:14 [H 15]). In Proverbs, the generous man, the diligent man, and the one who trusts in the Lord are all called "fat" or "prosperous" (Prov 11:25; Prov 13:4; Prov 28:25). Good news "gives health to the bones" (Prov 15:30). Psalm 23:5 refers to the head "anointed (made fat) with oil" as a description of the blessing of God. The noun for "overflows" is מִלְאָה that implies *saturation*. It is formed from the Hiphil stem of מַלְאָה that occurs twice in Psalms: Ps 23:5 and Ps 66:12 – You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.

<sup>7</sup> The tactile image of the "cup" (כֶּדֶם) pictures the banquet context of David at the table of the King, his Shepherd. His cup is blessed by God. See Ps 16:5 -- LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The cup may also foreshadow the cup of Christ in the NT. The cup can represent either salvation or judgment (see Pss 75:8; 116:13).

**אֵךْ תָּבוֹן וְחַסְדְּ יְרָדְפָנִי כָּל־יָמִי חַיִּים וְשַׁבְתִּי בַּבֵּית־יְהוָה לְאַרְךְ יָמִים:**

**6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

Not only will David know the *spiritual* blessings of God's love and goodness in his temporal life, but he will know the eternal *spiritual* blessings of God in heaven – to *dwell in God's presence* FOREVER. That is, he will live forever in God's presence!! If this is not redemption *completed*, then what is? His days will have "length," but spiritually speaking they will last forever. The "house of the Lord" represents the covenant-presence of YWHH established provisionally for Israel in the tabernacle-temple sanctuary, but it did not just rest there, This presence represented the *restored Edenic presence* of God, and foreshadowed, forepictured, and foretold the future presence of God with and in his people the church, and in and with his people in Paradise restored in the new heavens and the new earth.

The promise to David that his house would endure forever, is of course Messianic – that the Shepherd of Israel would be the King of Israel who would deliver all of God's people.



What is it that draws a person the Christ? Primarily a guilty conscience, sense of shame and sinfulness? Perhaps that is often the catalyst, but my from experience and observation of others, I believe the Christ's love is what typically draws us to him. David understood this, and thus in his description of his own redemption he ends with affirming these beautiful aspects of our relationship to God: he gives us his **goodness** and his **love**, and enables us to once again stand and dwell in his presence – *forever*. The gospel is only good news if it is **FREELY GIVEN** and **FREELY RECEIVED**, and if it promises to be eternal. If it promises to be eternal, then it presupposes the bodily resurrection. He does not state this, but if he is planning on living in God's presence forever, then indeed he believed God would raise him up from the deep shadow-land of death to life everlasting in heaven.

*The Lord is My Shepherd* by Emily Johnson

