

Our Confidence, Psalm 23
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Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. We are currently in the midst of an emphasis on one of our five identities as a church: worshipers. Leading us through that emphasis is the word of God in a sermon series in the book of Psalms, subtitled, "Seeing All of Life Through the Lens of the Gospel".

Before we jump into today's text I just want to take a moment to commend Jason Crigler in his very first sermon last week. That was not like most first sermons, right?! I hope you were deeply encouraged by it, especially as you have watched Jason literally develop among you over the past ten years; going from a guy who didn't speak between songs to one who preached with power and effect.

Now for today, what series in the Psalms would be complete without perhaps the most well-known and beloved of all, Psalm 23? So I invite you to open your Bibles there with me. You can find it on page 458 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. The title of today's sermon is simply "Our Confidence," and the main idea is this: Our confidence toward the Lord is his commitment toward us. Here's how I think Psalm 23 lays this out:

- 1) In the desert, the Lord is provider - vv. 1-3
- 2) In the valley, the Lord is protector - v. 4
- 3) In the battle, the Lord is present - vv. 5-6

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Psalm 23. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

A Psalm of David.

- ¹ The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*
- ² He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.*
- ³ He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*

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.*

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

⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever. Psalm 23*

[Leader:] *The Lord has spoken to us.* [Congregation:] *Thanks be to God!* [You may be seated.]

Exposition

One of the most formative experiences of my life happened after a sixth grade basketball game. We were playing a major rival, and we were really intimidated because they were always so big and so good. Unfortunately, like usual, they routed us during the game, the kind of whooping that makes you just want to give up. Afterward I came out of the locker room dejected and hoping for some encouragement. My mom came out of the stands to meet me, and in front of my teammates and coaches she said, “If you’re not going to hustle, don’t even play. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” And from that moment on, I resolved to never be found guilty of not hustling.

And you know what I easily become a slave to? The *hustle*. The grind. The endless drive to go, go, go. I don’t know your story, but I would be willing to bet you’re sometimes a slave to it as well. It’s the desperate need to be busy and productive, and we’re not even sure why. But somewhere along the way, there’s probably a clear cultural lens that explains it. These are normal, regular experiences that give meaning to the hustle:

- Maybe it’s when your grades are about to be posted at semester’s end
- Maybe it’s during your annual review at work
- Maybe it’s when you take your child to her annual check-up

- Maybe it's when you check your bank account after all the bills are paid
- Maybe it's when you count up how many times you've shared the gospel in the past month or how much ministry you've been involved in

What are we taught to believe is our *confidence* as we approach these moments? That our performance will be approved. And so, we hustle.

What's scary about this is how vastly different it is from the lens of the Bible! It's not that we don't need confidence of God's approval on the day we meet him face to face. It's where that confidence comes from.

You may not think of Psalm 23 this way, but it is well described as a psalm of *confidence*.¹ The author, David, is describing what is his confidence in the midst of the hustle. The exact circumstances we don't know—but we don't really need to know. That's not why Psalm 23 is so precious to us. It's precious to us because it captures the confidence of being in a relationship with God—and not just with poetic words, but images that express his commitment to us.²

1) In the Desert, the Lord is Provider - vv. 1-3

So, let's consider our first image together: in the desert, the Lord is provider. Read with me in verse 1:

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. Psalm 23:1

As the Holy Spirit inspired David to creatively describe his confidence, his mind didn't go to the royal bank account he's worked hard to build up to take care of any need or emergency. No, his confidence is his covenant relationship with the Lord. And the image he chooses to describe it is the pulsing heart of the whole psalm, and everything else flows from it.³ What is it? It's not the high and lofty idea of a king or deliverer; it's not an impersonal description of a rock or a shield. Instead, David says, "The Lord is my *shepherd*"—it's personal; it's intimate.⁴

¹ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 205

² Craigie, 208-209

³ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 127

⁴ Kidner, 127; Craigie, 209

And though this was a meaningful term for David since he had grown up a shepherd, it has the potential of being lost on us today. We don't live in an agrarian society filled with shepherds. When's the last time you saw a shepherd leading a flock past your house?

Story - a day in the life of a shepherd

And just as in the time of the Bible, shepherding is not a well-respected vocation. The bottom line is that your entire life is wrapped up in the muck and mire and endless routine of a flock that depends on you for everything.

And that's what David is getting at here. He's recognized that he is a desperately needy sheep, and the Lord has made the commitment to be his shepherd.⁵ I mean, who else would you rather have as your shepherd?! Who is possibly going to do a better job than God? That's why David can say, "I shall not want" (which basically means, "I have everything I need"). And not just in the way of "God's going to give me all the *stuff* I need," but in God *himself*—I have everything I need. He's my Shepherd who has committed to the muck and mire and endless routine of keeping me, and thus

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

*He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake. Psalm 23:2-3*

What this shows us is that David didn't just make up this image based on his personal experience as a shepherd. In a world that's holding up tolerance as the highest virtue, that's our temptation when we need some confidence—to create our own personal "truth" from our own opinion and experience. That's not what David is doing here. The language points us back throughout the Old Testament:

- To Genesis, where the Lord is first referred to as a Shepherd of his people⁶
- To Exodus, where the Lord leads his people out of slavery and literally shepherds them through the desert and into green pastures
- To Numbers, where the Lord sought out for his people a resting place like still waters⁷

⁵ Craigie, 209

⁶ Genesis 49:24

⁷ Numbers 10:33

This was the establishment of the covenant relationship between God and his Old Testament people.⁸ This is where God taught them over and over not to put their confidence in their commitment to him, but in his commitment to them.

And don't miss this in the warm fuzzies of Psalm 23—God intentionally leads his people into a desert to show them how desperately they need him; to convince them that the strength to follow his commands could never come from them; to show them that only in following him could walk they walk in paths of righteousness. This is the provision we need most.

Church, our confidence is not that the Lord will keep us out of the desert. It's that in the desert, the Lord is provider.

2) In the Valley, the Lord is Protector - v. 4

And this is a truth that leads us well into the second image of Psalm 23: in the valley, the Lord is protector. Read with me in verse 4:

***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. Psalm 23:4***

Psalm 23 is one of those parts of Scripture that's so familiar, it's easy to miss what's actually being said. Get this: those paths of righteousness that the Lord leads us in for his name's sake—they run through *the valley of the shadow of death*.

No doubt for David, just as we've already acknowledged, this was built on the story of the exodus, where God accompanied his people through actual valleys in the desert. Despite all the suffering back in Egypt, at least they knew what was around the next corner. But walking through an unfamiliar valley, who in the world knows what's lurking in the shadows!

But based on how David concludes the psalm, and how this phrase is used in the rest of the Bible, David also seemed to have *actual* death in mind. Which makes sense, because even for those in God's flock, death isn't something we're spared from.⁹

⁸ Craigie, 207; Kidner, 127

⁹ Craigie, 207; Kidner, 128-129

So then, what confidence do we have? Especially when we acknowledge that God is the one who leads us into life's valleys—and even death valley. David says, “[Even still,] I will fear no evil, [why?] for you are with me.” Once again, the Lord himself is enough. Who else can lead us through death, where all other companions turn back and you must go on alone?¹⁰

Example - situations in our church where people aren't saying, “If the Lord gets us through this, then he's enough,” but instead are wrestling with “Even in the midst of this, he's enough”

Taking this even further, David says, “your rod and your staff, they comfort me,” these being the two tools shepherds carry to protect the flock:

- The rod, or club, to control the enemies
- And the staff, or crook, to control the flock¹¹

This is completely counterintuitive—David is taking comfort not just in the Lord's protection, but the Lord's discipline. If you're around a shepherd for any time at all, you immediately notice how he is constantly using his staff to guide them back onto the path—sometimes gently, and sometimes with a pretty hard whack. And as the sheep come to trust the shepherd instead of themselves, they recognize that the discipline is actually their protection.¹²

We see this later in the story of God's people, when they have so profaned God's name among the nations with their straying from his paths that he sends them into exile. Are they cut off forever? We read in the prophet Ezekiel,

¹¹ “For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back

¹⁰ Kidner, 129

¹¹ Craigie, 207

¹² Kidner, 129

the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice...²³ And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken. Ezekiel 34:11-12, 14-16, 23-24

Church, our confidence is not that the Lord will keep us out of the valley. It's that in the valley, the Lord is protector.

3) In the Battle, the Lord is Present - vv. 5-6

This brings us to the last image of Psalm 23: that in the battle, the Lord is present. Here, David actually leaves behind the picture of the Lord as a shepherd, and describes him instead as a host. It begins in verse 5:

*⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows. Psalm 23:5*

It's one thing to make it through the valley just by the hair on your chinny-chin-chin. It's another thing altogether to turn it into a feast. And that's what David is describing: a thanksgiving feast with all the trimmings. Oh, with one caveat—it's being eaten while surrounded by enemies!

The point here isn't so much to make us think about what it would be like to have a picnic in the middle of a firefight. In other words, the focus isn't on the enemies or the participants, but the *host*. In the Old Testament world, to have someone host you well, and to spread a table before you with food for your hunger and oil for your refreshment and drink for your thirst, it was an expression of loyalty, and could even be taken as the signature of a covenant.¹³

What David has come to know and cling to as his confidence, isn't that in the craziest moment of life's hustle he can tune out all the battles raging within and without and spread a table of worship before the Lord. No! It's that *the Lord* has spread the table and welcomed *him*. Many of us are trying to be Jesus sleeping in the boat in the middle

¹³ Kidner, 129

of the storm—when we’re actually the ones in the story crying out to him and learning to recognize that he’s the one in charge of the wind and the waves.

And when this becomes your confidence, we begin finding ourselves genuinely believing things like this:

*⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever. Psalm 23:6*

It’s like, “Whoa, wait a minute, this feast isn’t like Thanksgiving, that lasts a moment, but it’s the rest of my life.”¹⁴ When you begin to recognize that the Shepherd leads you into the desert and the valley and the battle *for your good* and not your harm, you realize that something’s after you—not evil, but goodness and mercy. Goodness and mercy, both characteristics God uses to describe himself over and over to his Old Testament people. And it’s not just that they follow along in life, but the verb might more effectively be translated here “pursue”.¹⁵ They pursue me—better yet, the Lord pursues me. It’s like the song we opened today’s gathering with:

*Oh no, You never let go
Through the calm and through the storm
Oh no, You never let go
In every high and every low
Oh no, You never let go
Lord, You never let go of me¹⁶*

And if we can have that kind of confidence in life, then we can also have it in death. The Lord had convinced David that his covenant was eternal, and he was pleased to shepherd his people all the way home. And here, this brings us full circle in the psalm. We began with “The Lord is my shepherd,” and what is that but a description of David’s confidence that the Lord was committed to him forever, that Lord actually wanted to be with him. And that’s it: *what if all that you walk through in life, is meant to slow you down enough to convince you, and through you to others, that God actually wants to be with you?*

¹⁴ Kidner, 130

¹⁵ Kidner, 130

¹⁶ Matt Redman, “You Never Let Go,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76ifTTuL4XI>

Church, our confidence is not that the Lord will keep us out of the battle. It's that in the battle, the Lord is present.

Conclusion

Remember my story earlier about the basketball game? As I have recently reentered that story, I have discovered even more about the script I developed from it. Not just a life of hustle for approval, but a life with a lot of fear, and not a lot of confidence. Back then it looked like bus rides to and from basketball games sitting alone and crushed. More recently it has looked like walks up and down this stage to preach feeling alone and crushed. That's what trusting in your own hustle can do for you.

And so, if the solution isn't just to hustle more, what do we do? It's been clear today that David chose to look back upon God's commitment to his people during the exodus, and that gave him an overwhelming confidence in God's commitment to him. Do we do the same? Yes—but we look back upon something far greater. Psalm 23 may never be quoted in the New Testament—but the Shepherd of whom David spoke is. In John 10 we read these precious words:

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... [Whoa—this isn't just a Shepherd who leads us through the desert by destroying our enemies. He has allowed our enemies to destroy him on the cross—'No! Not my sheep!' he says—'Spare them, and take me.'] ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again... [Don't miss that this Shepherd was perfectly approved before the Father—and he laid that down so it could be given to you! So that even though you were born straying like a sheep and hustling to make up for it, you could be changed; you could be part of the flock described in v. 27] ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me [into green pastures and beside still waters]. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand [as they dwell in the house of the Lord forever]. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them

to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.” John 10:7-11, 14-17, 27-30

This Good Shepherd rose from the dead to show us he indeed is the Lord who has conquered our deserts and valleys and battles—and so he doesn't take them away, he goes into them with us. And that's what we need most! That is our confidence! He is the Shepherd holding us who will NEVER LET GO.¹⁷ So that in both life and death we can embody the old hymn that says,

*All the way my Savior leads me
Who have I to ask beside
How could I doubt His tender mercy
Who through life has been my guide
And when my spirit clothed immortal
Wings its flight to realms of day
This my song through endless ages
Jesus led me all the way¹⁸*

So why are you hustling? Why are you trying to find your confidence in anything else? Let this Shepherd lead you back to himself today. Look, he has spread a table before you in the presence of your enemies, the sins that wreck your confidence and the powers who condemn you day and night.

On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and said to his disciples, “This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me.” He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, “This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns.” **Today we are announcing that the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, is our confidence now and forever.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front. If you're a baptized believer, come and remember who you are and whose you are. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take

¹⁷ Craigie, 209

¹⁸ Fanny Crosby, “All the Way My Savior Leads Me,” for a modern rendition, see <https://www.worshiptogether.com/songs/all-the-way-my-savior-leads-me/>

Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back to talk and pray with you about any need you have. Let's pray.

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