

## CALL and RESPONSE

### *Psalm 23*

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Last Fall as my thoughts turned to our preaching schedule for 2021, I immediately thought of the Psalms because they communicate our Heavenly Father’s compassion and care and his presence with us in difficult times. And nowhere else in Scripture like the Psalms do we see the emotions of the human heart transparently poured out before God in prayer. As I shared what I was thinking about the Psalms with our staff and asked for their help in crafting a title for the series, Pastor Cindy Agoncillo suggested the phrase: *Call and Response*. I love the simplicity, the clarity and the power of those three words. Fittingly, the Psalms have long been viewed as a prayer book, and *Call and Response* sums up the nature of prayer and our relationship with God.

In the Introduction to his paraphrase of the Psalms, author and pastor, Eugene Peterson, describes how he was led to paraphrase the Psalms, and eventually the entire Bible—which many of us are familiar with as The MESSAGE. Peterson explains that as a pastor one of his primary goals was to teach his church family to pray by moving beyond the basics of “*Please help me, God*” and “*Thank you for your blessings.*” And while teaching followers of Jesus to pray might seem simple enough, many of us struggle with insecurities like, “*I’m not really good enough to pray,*” and “*I don’t know the right theological words to say.*” Peterson writes, My usual response when presented with these difficulties is to put the Psalms in a person’s hand and say, “Go home and pray these. You’ve got wrong ideas about prayer; the praying you find in these Psalms will dispel the wrong ideas and introduce you to the real thing.” A common response of those who do what I ask is surprise—they don’t expect this kind of thing in the Bible. And then I express surprise at their surprise: “Did you think the psalmists’ language would be polished and polite?”

We tend to think that prayer is what good people do when they are doing their best. It is not. We suppose that there must be an “insider” language that must be acquired before God takes us seriously in our prayer. There is not. Prayer is elemental, not advanced language. It is the means by which our language becomes honest, true, and personal in response to God. It is the means by which we get everything in our lives out in the open before God. (Eugene Peterson, Introduction to Psalms)

The title, *Call and Response* captures my hope for this series—that each of us is helped in our quest to grow in relationship with God by honestly calling out to God with what’s on our

hearts in prayer and by receiving his response amidst our need. I'd like to begin our Psalms journey today by exploring the best-known Psalm of all, Psalm 23. Let's read this Psalm responsively...

### Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

**He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.**

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

**Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

**You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**

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

Before we look more closely at this Psalm, I want to speak to an obstacle many of us bump into when we consider God's promises like those stated in Psalm 23. In his book, [The Spiritual Danger of Doing Good](#), Peter Greer, who has served in ministry around the world, says, "*Affluence has insulated us from a theology of suffering and leaves us open to the belief that good people deserve only good things.*" Greer points out that many of us believe in "Christian Karma"—the idea that if I do good God will bless me. So, when trouble or difficulty comes our way, we assume we've done something to displease God. Reading Psalm 23 during a hard season we might ask, "*Why wasn't the Shepherd watching over his sheep?*" "*Where is God's promised rest and blessing?*" "*God, why does it seem like your rod is being used to punish, rather than comfort me?*" "*Father, why are people who make no effort to please you protected from hardship, while I find myself in pain?*" And "*Where is your promised goodness and mercy?*"

I don't have adequate answers for those questions, beyond this: in Psalm 23 God promises his presence. Listen to the phrases found in this Psalm: *The Lord is my shepherd. He leads me. He guides me. You are with me. You comfort me. You prepare a table for me. You anoint my head. Your goodness and love will follow me. I will dwell in your house forever.* The

primary promise of Psalm 23 is God's presence—wherever we are and whatever we walk through, God is with us; we're not alone.

For those interested in studying Psalm 23 more deeply, I recommend a book by Phillip Keller titled, [A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23](#). I read the book many years ago but reread it in preparation for this sermon. In the book, Keller, a pastor, bible teacher and throughout his life a sheep-owner, gives fascinating insights into the relationship between a shepherd and the sheep. In his book, Keller walks through each statement in the Psalm and applies insights from his shepherding experience.

Psalm 23 begins with the statement: *"The Lord is my shepherd."* Phillip Keller notes that along with a father and his child, a shepherd and his sheep is one of the two most frequent analogies used in Scripture for God's relationship with us. David, the author of the Psalm, and himself a shepherd, understood that any sheep's well-being depended on the nature and character of the person who owned it. Keller recounts a vivid memory of a neighbor of his who didn't care well for his sheep—this man's farm wasn't well tended; the sheep weren't well groomed; and, their pasture wasn't lush and healthy. Frequently Keller saw this farmer's sheep standing at the fence separating his property from his neighbor's, looking longingly at the lush grass on the other side of the fence.

As followers of Jesus, you and I are blessed with a shepherd who loves and cares for us, so much that He literally laid down his life for us. He continually intercedes on our behalf before his Father. And He works to ensure that we'll benefit from his care. In the Bible in John 10—a chapter titled, "The Good Shepherd and His Sheep"—Jesus contrasts his care for his sheep with our enemy Satan. In John 10:10 we read these words of Jesus, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."* John 10:10

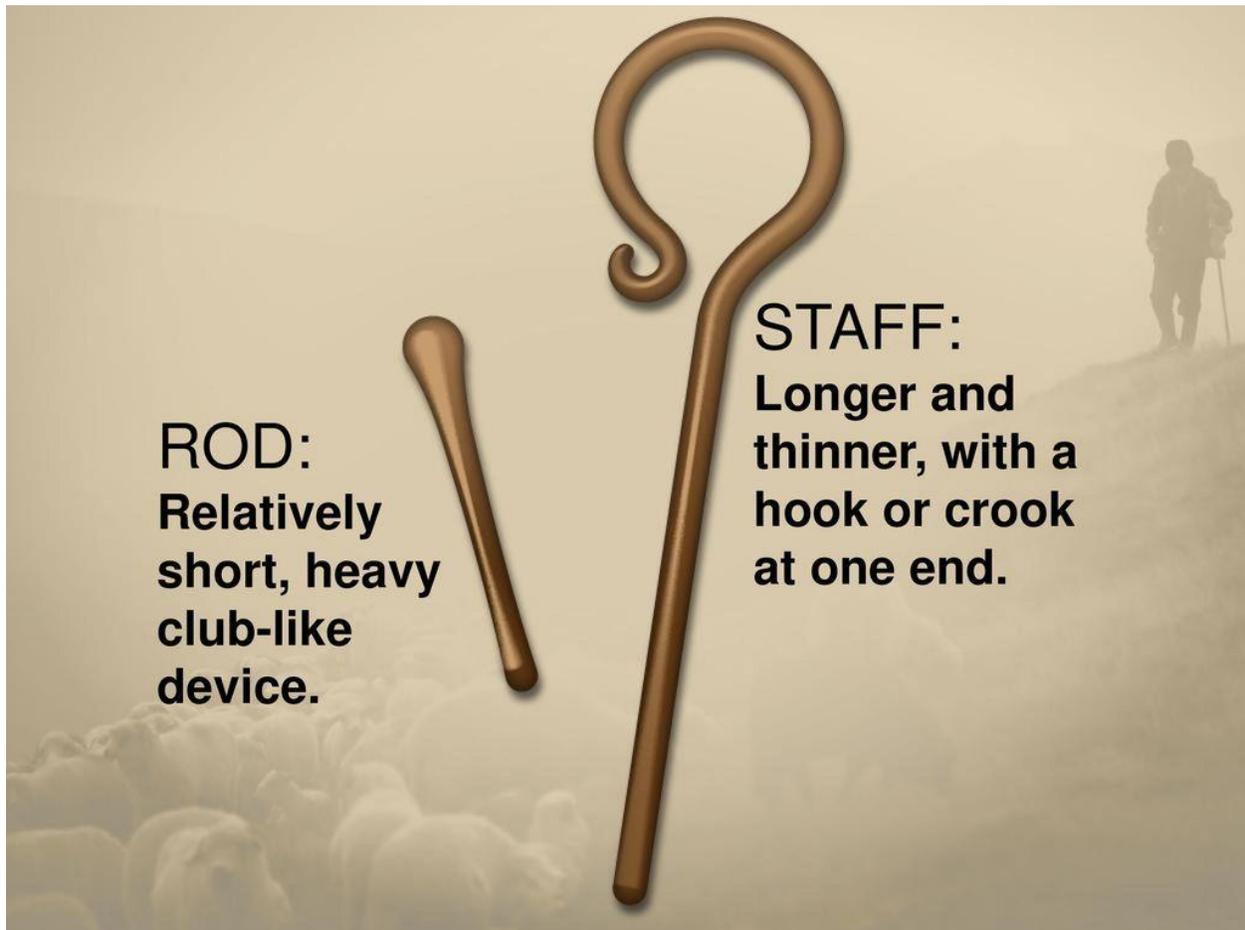
*"The Lord is my shepherd,"* is followed by the words, *"I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul."* These promises pertain to much more than material blessings or the absence of trouble. They point again to the presence of the shepherd and the safety his presence ensures. Sheep by nature are anxious and easily unsettled animals. Keller points out that sheep will only lie down and rest if they are free from fear, free from tension with other sheep, free from aggravating insects that torment them

and free from hunger. The sheep are incapable of taking care of any of these needs themselves. Only the shepherd can meet these needs for the sheep.

If you didn't realize it prior to today, you're probably tuning into the fact that likening us to sheep isn't a very favorable comparison and the next phrase in this psalm highlights that reality even more. *"He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake."* Sheep need to be guided, because left untended, they will harm themselves. They'll eat grass down to the roots, so that it is unable to replenish itself. They'll travel the same paths repeatedly creating gullies where they'll stumble, trip and get hurt. And unless watched carefully, they'll insist on drinking polluted water, even when fresh water is within sight. The shepherd's guidance isn't just a nice benefit; it's essential for the good of the sheep. The last phrase in this sentence, *"for his name's sake,"* reminds us that in leading, caring for and providing for the sheep, the shepherd's reputation is at stake. Likewise, our lives reflect the character and nature of Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

To this point in the psalm, it's as if the sheep have been speaking to sheep from other flocks, boasting to them of the goodness of their shepherd and the benefits they receive from his care. Now there's a transition and the sheep begin speaking directly to their shepherd. *"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."* All of us walk through valleys—that's the nature of life—but we don't have to walk through those valleys alone. In John chapter 16 verse 33, Jesus comforts us with these words, *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* The question for us is not whether we'll walk through shadow-filled valleys. The question is, how will we walk through the inevitable valleys we come upon? Will we go through them with fear and anxiety or with calmness and security based on the faith we have in Jesus?

The Psalmist continues in Psalm with the words, “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”



**ROD:**  
Relatively  
short, heavy  
club-like  
device.

**STAFF:**  
Longer and  
thinner, with a  
hook or crook  
at one end.

At a young age shepherds choose a young sapling and craft a rod from it of the appropriate length and weight. In the hand of a skilled shepherd the rod could quickly be hurled to ward off or kill predators before they attacked the sheep, and it could also be used to strike a sheep that had wandered away and was about to get itself into trouble. The shepherd’s rod was an extension of himself and with it in his hand he demonstrated his authority and strength.

The shepherd’s staff brought comfort and assurance to both the shepherd and the sheep. The staff served as a walking stick and provided something for the shepherd to lean on as he or she rested. The crook of the staff was used to draw a wayward sheep in close to its mother or from a place of danger to the shepherd. The staff was used to guide the sheep in the way the shepherd wanted them to go—through difficult terrain or perhaps through a gate. And

at times, Keller notes, the shepherd would place the staff lightly on the flank of a sheep as the sheep walked to assure the animal of the shepherd's presence.

Psalm 23 concludes with the words, "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*" I want us to focus specifically on the last sentence, "Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." Those words serve as a fitting conclusion to all the sheep has expressed earlier in this Psalm. Keller points out that these words point to the ever-present shepherd being on the scene, but also to the idea that the sheep wants to be in full view of his owner at all times. And Phillip Keller concludes his book with these words,

When all is said and done on the subject of a successful Christian walk, it can be summed up in one sentence, "Live ever aware of God's presence." There can be an habitual awareness of Christ within me, empowering me to live a noble and richly rewarding life in cooperation with Himself. As I respond to Him and move in harmony with his wishes I discover life becomes satisfying and worthwhile. This is made possible as I allow his gracious Spirit to control, manage and direct my daily decisions. I live surrounded by His presence. I am an open person, an open individual, living life open to His scrutiny. He is conscious of every circumstance I encounter. He attends me with care and concern because I belong to Him. And this will continue through eternity. What an assurance! I shall dwell in the presence and in the care of the Lord forever. Keller, p. 142

I'll read Psalm 23 again—this time from The MESSAGE Paraphrase—and then we'll have a chance for call and response as we worship God in singing.

#### Psalm 23

GOD, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from.

True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I'm not afraid when you walk at my side.

Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies.

You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.

I'm back home in the house of GOD for the rest of my life. The MESSAGE

As we conclude our service, I've asked Sherry and her team to lead us in a bit longer time of worship that allows us to call out to our Good Shepherd and our Good Shepherd to respond to us.