

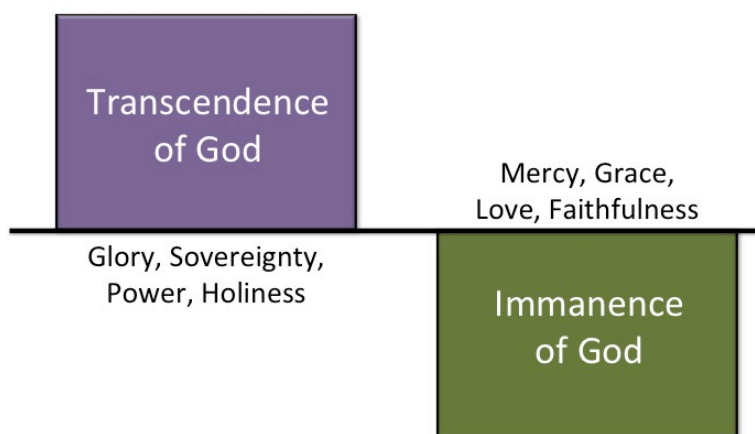
# The Love of the King

Psalm 23

This is the second Sunday of Advent. Last week we saw how Jesus is the One True King and focused on His authority and sovereignty – the need to stop our rebellion and surrender completely to Him. **Psalm 2** reminds us of how great and powerful, *how holy and exalted Jesus is* – transcendent beyond our ability to comprehend, glorious beyond imagination and utterly inaccessible. Yet the wonder of Christmas is that this eternally exalted Son of God CAME to dwell among us – sinful people though we are.

And so in theology we have these twin realities, these opposite truths – called *the transcendence and immanence of God*.

- At the same time *God is both infinitely glorious and personally present*;
- His glory reaches to the highest heavens, yet His mercy brought him to the lowest depths of the earth;
- His holiness is absolutely untarnished, yet He became fully human and was swallowed by the utter darkness of sin.



Psalm 2 presents the glorious transcendence of God. Today we turn to **Psalm 23** to see *the amazing immanence of God*, our loving, faithful, compassionate Shepherd. Last week we saw the glory and power of Christ the King. Today we study **the love of Christ our Shepherd**.

At family camp a few years ago we heard the famous Christian apologist, Josh McDowell. He asked the important question:

## What is love?

Think about that. In a culture that is obsessed with romance and physical acts of love, are we able to clearly define for ourselves and for our children what love really is? We are commanded to love God, one another and our neighbor – do we know what that means?

So – **What is love?** McDowell provided a helpful definition based on Eph. 5:29.

*“For no one ever hated his own flesh, but **nourishes and cherishes** it, just as Christ does the church.” Ephesians 5:29*

**“Love protects and provides.”** Josh McDowell

- **To cherish someone is to protect them** like a piece of fine china – to handle them with care like the precious, valuable creation they are.
- **To nourish someone is to provide for them** whatever they need – to put their needs ahead of your own.

**Ladies, if a man dares to say he loves you**, press him to explain what he means. If what he means is that he wants things from you then he doesn't want to love you he wants to USE you. If he says he wants to protect you and provide for you then you might have found someone worth getting to know.

**Guys, if there is a woman in your life you claim to love** or you want to love – consider what it COSTS to love. Are you willing to protect that woman, especially from your weaknesses and sins? Are you willing to provide for her, sacrificing your desires for hers? That is the call of love.

**Parents, you say you love your kids** and no doubt you would die for them – but are you protecting them sufficiently from the dangers and temptations of this world? Are you providing for them the things they need most – like your time, attention and teaching of God's Word?

**Christians Believers, we say that God loves us**, but do we know what that really means? Do we realize that love is so much more than a warm fuzzy feeling toward someone – it involves action, commitment, sacrifice and service. And Psalm 23 shows us what the love of God really looks like – it is a shepherding love that protects and provides for us.

#### **God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- **Protection** - *"The Lord is my shepherd"*
- **& Provision** - *"I shall not want"*
- **in Christ** - *"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"*

We'll look first at how God's love protects us and then how it provides for us. Finally we'll see how God protected us completely provided for us eternally in CHRIST. God demonstrates His love for us first in His protection. Verses 1-2.

#### **God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- **Protection** -

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."*  
Psalm 23:1-3

**David learned about leadership first as a shepherd caring for a flock of sheep.** This was the most menial task in ancient times, so it fell to the youngest of the eight brothers in David's family. The first task of a shepherd is to protect the sheep both from internal and external enemies.

Sheep are not the smartest animals – so some of the greatest dangers to sheep are internal to them. Like sheep, sometimes you and I are our greatest enemies. The fact that the Bible frequently compares us to sheep – which is not meant to be a compliment - means we are not very smart,

often go astray and are intensely vulnerable. Therefore we desperately need a shepherd! And the first thing he protects us from is ourselves – our internal enemies of distraction and disobedience.

### **God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- ***Protection from Internal Enemies*** – Distraction & Disobedience

*“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake... Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Psalm 23:1,4*

***Sheep are easily distracted and confused*** and frequently go astray. So they need to be led by a skillful shepherd who knows each of them and calls them. Jesus points out that his sheep know his voice and they follow him. That is how shepherding worked in the old days – the shepherd had a call or whistle that was unique to him and the sheep knew that sound and would come. A different voice or a different call would not work for them – only that shepherd they knew and that familiar call.

***“The LORD leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”*** Our good shepherd calls us to follow Him and He guides us every moment of every day. Oh, how easily distracted we are! How quickly we turn away from His guiding voice... But our shepherd gently, patiently, lovingly calls us back.

- Have you learned to listen to your Shepherd’s voice?
- When you get distracted and have wandered off can you hear the Holy Spirit calling you back?
- Are you quick to come back or do you stray farther and farther away?

The Lord is leading us ***in PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS!*** He is teaching us to be more and more like Him – keeping us from being conformed to the pattern of this world but to be transformed ever more into His image. And he does this ***“for his name’s sake”*** – that He might be glorified in and through us.

The Lord protects us from distraction and also **from disobedience**. Two tools of the shepherd are mentioned in verse 4 – his rod and staff. The rod was for wolves and other predators and we’ll talk about that in a minute. But the staff was for the sheep.

- ***If one sheep was biting another one*** – whack – that staff would swing in there to separate them and correct the biter.
- ***If a sheep stepped out of line*** and was wandering toward a thorn-bush or a cliff, the shepherd would use the long staff to guide the sheep back into line.
- ***If a sheep fell into a hole*** and couldn’t get out, the shepherd’s staff had a crook at the end so he could reach down and pick up the sheep that had fallen.

A great book I read a few years ago is called *A Shepherd Looks at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm*, by Phillip Keller. The author walks through this passage in detail as one who knows sheep and shepherding. Many of my insights today are from this book. At one point he describes a sheep that has fallen over and cannot get up. Sometimes their wool would get so heavy that if one tipped over it would be unable to get back to its feet without help from the shepherd.

***What a picture of our weakness in sin!*** Like wool, our sin has a tendency to grow upon us – and it reaches the point where we fall and are unable to get up on our own. Do you feel the weight of your sin upon you? Have you strayed from the Shepherd’s voice? Have you stumbled recently? Have you fallen? Are you realizing that you cannot get up on your own?

I have good news for you today! The Lord is a good shepherd – He can lift you up with His staff and shave the wool of sin right off of you. Come and confess your sins to Jesus and you will immediately feel 100 pounds lighter. Just call out to Him – your shepherd knows exactly where you are and stands ready to lift you up – but he waits to hear you call!

Our good shepherd protects us from our internal enemies of distraction and disobedience. He also protects us from the enemies outside of us.

**God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- ***Protection from External Enemies*** – Danger, Deception & Death

*“He leads me beside still waters... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil... Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Psalm 23:2,4*

***This world is filled with dangers.*** High on the list for sheep is fast moving water. If a sheep stepped into a creek and lost its footing it could easily be swept downstream and drown. A good shepherd leads his sheep to green pastures and still waters.

Now we know that ***God doesn’t protect us completely from every danger*** in this world – but we do know that **He LIMITS our suffering** to what He knows is good for us and what He knows we can handle. 1 Corinthians 10:13 is an important verse to memorize:

**God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- ***Protection from External Enemies - Danger***

*“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” 1 Corinthians 10:13*

The word for temptation is the same word for ***trial or tribulation***. In this world we will have these trials. Jesus never promised to keep us from all suffering and trouble. But he did promise we could overcome through Him, for He has overcome the world! He allows a certain amount of suffering into our lives to grow us and mature us and prepare us for our ministry callings. This is why we can even rejoice in our sufferings because we know that such testing strengthens our character and makes us more like Christ.

**God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- ***Protection from External Enemies*** – Danger, Deception & Death

*“He leads me beside still waters... 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 23:2,4*

In addition to the dangers in this broken, fallen world, there are ***dangers from the devil*** and his many demons. Our adversary is pictured in 1 Peter as ***a roaring lion*** looking for someone to

devour. His mission is to steal and kill and destroy. Sheep were vulnerable to any predator – especially lions, wolves and bears. **So shepherds carried a rod** – a small club they could swing at close quarters or throw as a projectile.

Next to a demon, in terms of sheer power, you or I would be like a child sheep facing a lion – helpless to defend ourselves. People outside of Christ are like this – utterly powerless against the devil’s attacks, without any spiritual protection.

In some cultures the devil makes his presence known in scary, visible ways. In our culture the devil’s favorite trick is to convince the world he doesn’t exist. ***He majors, therefore, in deception.*** His goal is still destruction but he works covertly, behind the scenes, manipulating and misdirecting us.

But even in dark valleys of confusion and fear we need not fear evil for ***there are specific truths that we KNOW.*** The truth of God’s Word is the LIGHT God has given us to drive out the darkness of deception.

- When things are unclear – ***look for light in God’s Word.***
- When you feel confused – shine light on the situation through Scripture.
- When you are afraid – study God’s promises and let them light up your darkness.
- When your life feels unsteady – focus on the unshakeable truth we know in the Bible.

**And do all of this in community.** Sheep are most vulnerable when they wander off on their own. Predators are always looking for the one that separates from the herd.

Young people – this is why it’s so important that you ***choose your friends very carefully.*** I’ve seen it happen too many times that a teenager falls in with the wrong group of friends and they lead him astray. When you start at a new school or start a new job your first priority should be to find one or two strong believers so you can encourage each other and walk through life together.

Older people – don’t ignore this principle! Through all of life we need each other and are in danger if we walk too long alone!

God protects us from danger and deception. The final danger our Good shepherd protects us from is DEATH. Verse 4.

### **God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- ***Protection from External Enemies*** – Danger, Deception & Death

***“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me... and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”*** Psalm 23:2,4

All of us will face death eventually – both with our loved ones and eventually ourselves. Death is the last enemy to be defeated. ***Right now*** God’s promise is to be with us in the valley of the shadow of death. But ultimately God’s promise is that we will dwell in His house, with Him, forever.

***When Jesus rose from the dead he conquered sin and death forever.*** Death no longer has a sting – it has been disarmed for those who are in Christ. The sting of death is SIN and the power of sin is the LAW. If your sins have been covered in Christ then the requirements of the Law have been satisfied in your case. So you will still face death but not as a lion that will rip you to shreds but as a kitty that has had its claws removed.

Love protects and provides. The Lord is our good shepherd and He loves us perfectly – both protecting us from our enemies and by providing everything we need for us so we can truly say, “I shall not want.”

### **God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- ***Protection*** – “*The Lord is my shepherd*”
- ***Provision*** – “*I shall not want*”

Let’s look briefly at four provisions from our Good Shepherd and then we’ll see how God’s protection and provision are ultimately realized in Christ.

### **God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- ***Provision*** – *of Rest*

“*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.*” Psalm 23:1

A good shepherd not only allows sheep to lie down, he **MAKES US** lie down. Sheep won’t lie down if they are hungry, hurting or fearful. A shepherd has to know his sheep and their condition – addressing all of their needs and fears in order to make them lie down.

As the footprints poem teaches, ***there are times when God carries us.*** Sometimes your weakest and lowest moments are when you will know the presence of God in the most powerful ways.

Two years ago there was a ***terrible hunting accident*** affecting a family in our church in Chicago. A young man thought he was shooting a coyote and tragically ended the life of his own brother. When the phone call came in about this excruciating news, I was the closest pastor, so I went. Thankfully this couple had been a part of a small group for over two decades, so I went with five other people who knew this woman very deeply and personally. It felt like being an army Colonel showing up at a mother’s home.

When she saw the group she thought it was a surprise social visit, but when she saw me she immediately feared the worst. You can imagine ***the agony of hearing these words*** echoing in your entryway – “There has been an accident. It’s your son. I’m so sorry – but he didn’t make it.” The poor woman collapsed to the ground in shock and started to wail with the misery that only a mother who has lost a child can know.

But then all of her friends fell to the ground with her in a pile of tears. They stayed there and wept with her for an hour and a couple of them stayed with her the rest of the evening and off an on through the next week.

It was the darkest tragedy I've ever seen. **But in the midst of that darkness there was a ray of light in the love of God expressed to this woman through her church family.** Many of you have, no doubt, experienced this yourself. The light of God's loving presence often shines brightest in the darkest moments of life. These are times when God MAKES us lie down. He addresses our deepest fears and our deepest needs for love, allowing us to REST.

At first you may feel nothing but pain, but *there is a PEACE that passes understanding* in these moments – *a REST that you can't describe* until you're in the middle of the storm yourself. There is a reason we read and reflect on Psalm 23 at most funerals. It speaks God's loving presence even into the darkest moments of life. And that is where we can find rest – in Him. Our Good Shepherd not only makes us lie down in green pastures, he leads us beside still waters. In addition to giving us rest he gives us refreshment, leading us to streams of living water!

### **God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- *Provision – of Rest, Refreshment & Restoration*

*“He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul... You prepare a table before me... You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” Psalm 23:2-3*

These gifts blur into each other as God nourishes us with green pastures, refreshes us with still waters and restores our souls within us. You can quickly see God does this for us *both physically and spiritually.*

**Everything we have in life is a direct gift from God.** Because He loves us, he provides for us abundantly, generously. Just because we live in America, we are profoundly blessed. If you have a place to stay and food to eat – you are blessed. If you have family and friends around you – you are blessed. If you have a job, a vehicle, clothing, health – all of these things are good gifts from God to you. He is a good shepherd who leads us to green pastures and still waters. So it is good and right to pray at every meal and give thanks to the Lord who provided for us.

God is deeply concerned about your physical well-being. But He knows that our deepest needs are not physical but spiritual. What we all need deep down is not just food, water and shelter – what we need is **to have our souls restored.** And God alone can do this. No vacation, no spa, no therapist, no purchase can do the work of soul restoration. A doctor can patch you up physically. But only God can restore your soul.

*“You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”* A shepherd carried oil to use on sheep like we use Neosporin – to soothe and medicate scratches and cuts. But oil in Scripture also represents the Holy Spirit who heals and strengthens us in our inner being. God demonstrates His love for us in how He provides rest, refreshment, restoration and all of this in RELATIONSHIP with Him.

### **God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- *Provision – of Rest, Refreshment, Restoration & Relationship*

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me... I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Psalm 23:4,6*

The ultimate rest, the ultimate refreshment and restoration is found in the presence of God. All of God's provisions are bound up in His presence. All of His protection is also tied to His presence. So with God, **it is ALL OR NOTHING**. You either have a right relationship with God and have his complete protection and eternal provision or you are NOT in a reconciled relationship with God and therefore do not have ANY of his protection or provision.

And the key to a right relationship with God and all the blessings that come with it is JESUS CHRIST.

**God demonstrates His love for us in His:**

- **Protection** – “The Lord is my Shepherd”
- **Provision** – “I shall not want”
- **in Christ** -

*“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” John 10:11*

If you have put your faith in Jesus – if you have called on Him to forgive your sin and become your Lord and Savior – then He has brought you into that right relationship with God. And **He is the only One who can.**

- No one else can protect you both physically and spiritually.
- No one else can deal with the enemies inside of you and all around you.
- No one else can provide what you really need – true rest, spiritual refreshing, restoration of your soul and a living relationship with God Himself.
- All of these things and more are available in Christ alone!

He is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. **When faced with the ultimate danger – the ultimate enemy – Jesus did not run away;** he did not back down; he did not hesitate. He faced that enemy head on.

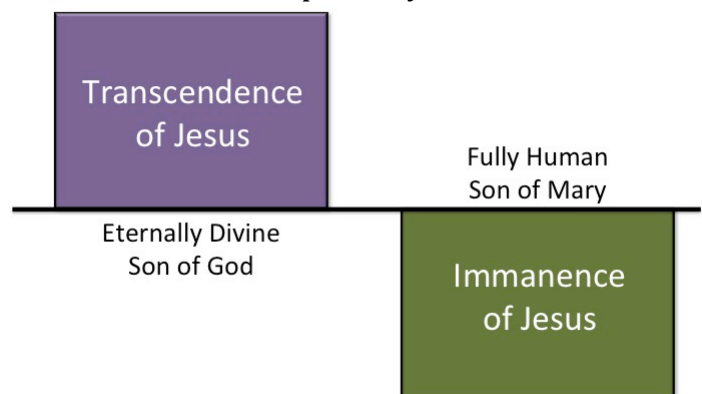
**The enemy was death and its weapons were sin and the law.** This enemy had defeated millions upon millions of people. No one could stand against this grim assassin. On the cross it seemed like Jesus too had lost the battle with death – bowing his head and giving up his spirit. But what looked like his greatest defeat was actually his ultimate victory. For by giving himself up to death he defeated death forever.

This brings us back to **the transcendence and immanence of God** – perfectly united in Christ.

As the eternally divine Son of God, **Jesus is glorious and holy** – exalted in power and majesty above all things.

And as the fully human son of Mary **Jesus is perfectly present**, becoming the suffering servant who was able to die for our sin.

This is **the beauty of the incarnation** – the mystery we celebrate at Christmastime.





- The Son of God became the Son of Man.
- The glorious Creator for a time was a microscopic embryo.
- The sovereign ruler of the universe was born as a helpless baby.
- The all-knowing giver of wisdom had to learn his ABC's and 123's.
- The Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 became the Lamb of God in John 1 who would take away the sin of the world by dying as a sacrifice.

***Both sides of this union were necessary to defeat death and deliver us from our sin.*** Jesus had to be fully human to die in our place as the representative substitute for all people. And he had to be fully divine for his sacrifice to have infinite value. Because he was truly human he was able to die. Because he had satisfied the justice of God he came back from the dead.

And in that moment of **Jesus' resurrection** – what we saw last week was the moment of his anointing, his coronation as the King of Kings – death was defeated. The power of death was broken and his unassailable kingdom had its gates broken down. Death still reigns in this world over all who do not belong to Jesus. But for those of us who do belong to Jesus death holds no fear – for ***he has been disarmed.*** Jesus took away ***the weapons of sin and the law*** so he cannot use them against us. So we can stand before death, confident and defiant saying, **“Where, oh death, is your sting?”**

Listen one more time to the wonderful message of Psalm 23 and see how beautifully all of these blessings are ours in Christ:

**God demonstrates His love for us:**

- ***in Christ – Complete Protection & Eternal Provision***

*“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want... He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul... I will fear no evil, for you are with me... my cup overflows... and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”* Psalm 23

Jesus protects us completely! ***He alone can deliver us from the enemies inside of us*** – the distraction and disobedience of our sin-soaked hearts. Only when we drink the living water he offers and allow Him to restore our souls and fill us with His Spirit can we begin to truly honor God and obey His law.

***Jesus alone can protect us from the enemies around us.*** We do not need to fear anything in this valley of the shadow of death in which we live – “No weapon formed against us will prosper, all those who rise up against us will fall, I will not fear what the devil may bring me, I am a servant of God!” Yes in all these things we are more than conquerors THROUGH CHRIST because NOTHING can separate us from His love.

***Jesus alone can provide what our souls long for.*** He invites all who are weary to come to Him for rest. He can give you a new heart with new desires. He can fill you with power and begin to heal you of the brokenness of this world – to anoint your head with the oil of His Spirit so you can honestly say “my cup overflows.”

***And Jesus alone can bring you safely to heaven.*** He is the only way to have a relationship with the Father – only those who cry out to Him in faith can be forgiven and made right with God so they will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Jesus is the one who promised to go and prepare a place for his followers. Jesus is the one who promised to come back to get us so we too could be where he is.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He laid down His life for us – His sheep. May we worship Him this Christmas! May we trust in Him completely and love Him wholeheartedly knowing in our hearts, “The Lord is MY Shepherd – I shall not want.”

Let's pray!