



Attacking Anxiety

Summary and Goal

We are anxious about everything. Worrying is like praying to yourself, while David tells us that God makes us lie down in green pastures. The strange thing about sheep is because of their very make up it is almost impossible for them to made to lie down unless specific requirements are met. As those who are called sheep in this parable, what of fear, friction, pests, or hunger robs your joy and contributes to your anxiety?

Main Passages

Psalm 23:1-3

Session Outline

1. God is Sufficient (Psalm 23:1)
2. God Leads to Peace (Psalm 23:2-3a)
3. God Leads for His Glory (Psalm 23:3b)

Theological Theme

God's sovereignty and love for His people allows them to be calm and trust Him during anxious or treacherous times.

Christ Connection

Christ is God's greatest demonstration of His love for us. His life and death testify to God's provision and care from the greatest foe humanity will ever face.

Missional Application

As we study and embrace the fullness of God's divine care, Christians not only prepare their own hearts for seasons of anxiety, but also provide a source of hope and comfort to those who are desperately searching for it.

Historical Context of the Psalms

Purpose

There are myriad messages scattered through the 150 psalms, but overall, this record of the responses of God's people in worship and prayer serves the purpose of teaching us how to relate to God in various circumstances of life. The psalms also demonstrate God's sovereignty and goodness for his people in order to instill confidence in those who trust in him.

Author

Since the book is a collection of many different psalms written over a long time, there is not just one author for this collection. By far the most common designation in the titles is "Of David," which may refer to David as the author of those psalms. David's role as a musician in Saul's court (1Sm 16:14-23) as well as his many experiences as a shepherd, a soldier, and a king make him a likely candidate for writing many of these psalms.

Setting

The book of Psalms consists of many different hymns and prayers composed by individuals but used by the community. If one were to take the names in the titles as authors, the date of composition ranges from the time of Moses (fifteenth century BC) to a time following the exile (sixth century BC or later). Some of the titles do contain historical information that might indicate the setting of the composition, although even this (like the authorship) is ambiguous. They might not refer to the date of composition but to the setting of its contents, being composed some time after the events had taken place. This is a more likely scenario since some of these psalms describe life-threatening situations, where composing a psalm in the heat of the moment would not have been a top priority. In many cases, these psalms include thanksgiving sections as well, showing that they were written after God had answered the prayers.

Special Features

The word for psalms in Hebrew is Tehilim, which means "praise." The English title is derived from the Greek translation (LXX) Psalmoi, which means "Songs of Praise." Praise directed to the Lord, the God of Israel, is certainly the primary emphasis in the Psalms. Some have referred to the Psalms as Israel's hymnbook, which is partially true but overall is insufficient to account for all that is in the Psalms. More than one-third of the collection is made up of prayers to God. Therefore, it contains both hymns and prayers that were used in the context of Israel's worship.

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Session Plan

Attacking Anxiety

Introduction

Before your group time, show this video: <https://vimeo.com/364391964>

- ❓ How clearly do you see barriers, opportunities, or challenges? Who can help you adjust your perspective to be more objective?
- ❓ Are there particular tasks or challenges you dread more severely than others? Why do you think that is so?

In this week's session, David opened what is perhaps the best-known psalm in Scripture by focusing on the scope of God's care for him. In doing so, he acknowledged God's supreme ability to not only know what was best for him, but to act accordingly. Understanding David's posture before God, as he recognized God's divine character, helps us to see the potential sources of anxiety against the same spiritual backdrop.

1. God is Sufficient (Psalm 23:1)

David's meditations on the Lord were personal and experiential. He knew and had experienced the LORD as his shepherd. It was particularly noteworthy that David spoke of God using the covenant name Yahweh. Doing so immediately communicated intimacy with the Almighty. David was not reliant upon the god of that country; he relied on God with whom he had numerous faith experiences. David had learned to discern His character, anticipate to some degree how He would move, and most importantly to this text, how to trust Him.

- ❓ What sort of experiences would you expect to encounter in order to arrive at a place where you could say that the Lord is your Shepherd? How have you seen Him in that light in your journey with Him so far?
- ❓ Application: What things in the world try to tell you what you "need?" How have you noticed those voices and outlets impacting your anxiety level?

2. God Leads to Peace (Psalm 23:2-3a)

David had in mind the lush, green meadows of springtime at the writing of verse 2. Not only was God's provision enough, from verse 1, His provision was of great quality. The lush green pastures would have met multiple needs, but primarily those of hunger and the need for rest. Those shepherded by the Lord would not struggle to find the occasional sprig of grass pushing through parched soul. Nor would the Lord's flock feel the rocky soil as they sought needed relief from fatigue. Rather, the picture painted by David was one of care and blessing, where needs were met with abundance and lavish grace. There was no evidence or hint of scarcity. There was no need to claw and scratch to meet those needs. When God leads His sheep, there is peace.

- ❓ What does the lavish nature of God's provision tell you about His love and care for you? Why is that important to remember, particularly in anxious seasons?
- ❓ Application: How do we seek to renew our own lives? In your experience, how long do those benefits last? How would the result be different than what David described?

3. God Leads for His Glory (Psalm 23:3b)

The notion of God leading along the right paths was predicated on God's superior/divine insight into which paths were the right ones. At a basic level, what qualifies anyone to be a guide of anything is the fact that the guide knows the terrain and is an expert at navigating it. Applying that idea to David's shepherd metaphor, David knew that God could and would lead him rightly, not just because He knew the right paths, but because He created everything that had ever existed. The Shepherd was the only trustworthy guide in existence.

- ❓ Describe a time when you realized you had gotten lost. What were the clues that led you to that realization? What did you do to correct course?
- ❓ Application: What evaluation would you give the shepherd you're following now? What roads have you been led to? Do you know The Shepherd, or are you just following a shepherd?

Conclusion

- ❓ How readily can you identify the things that cause you anxiety? Who do you trust to talk with about it? How often do you talk with them?
- ❓ Looking at your life situation right now, who would you say you're following based on your location? Are you on a right path or a wrong one?

❓ For Further Discussion

Chronicle some of your most significant spiritual moments with God. How has He shepherded you in those times? How does it confirm that God never loses sight of us?



Expanded Session Content

Attacking Anxiety

Introduction

Before your group time, show this video: <https://vimeo.com/364391964>

Anxiety, according to just about any credible source, is rapidly on the rise in the United States based on the number of reported cases seeking medical help. Unfortunately, in many cases, even getting to the point of confronting a battle with anxiety is a long struggle. The truth is that everyone experiences anxiety to some level. That is precisely why the Bible addresses it so frequently. It is not a sign of spiritual failure, loss of salvation, or anything of the like. It happens to everyone. To that point, Paul Tripp, a noted pastor, counselor, and theologian, wrote the following in a 2016 article entitled, “I Can’t Do It”:

When was the last time you felt nervous or overwhelmed with something looming on the horizon of your life? When was the last time you threw your hands up in despair and said, “I can’t do it!”

Maybe it was before a job interview or a big presentation at work that you couldn’t afford to mess up. Maybe it was on the morning of your wedding. Maybe it was waiting on the results of a serious medical test for you or a loved one.

Or perhaps it was right before a mundane moment of everyday life: a difficult conversation with your spouse, another moment of correction with your child, a call to sacrifice in your home, an opportunity to share the Good News with your neighbor, or a jab of physical pain in an aging body.

Every person, in some way or another, experiences anxiety in moments of life, whether big or small. Why does this happen to us? Because we’re constantly measuring our potential.

You and I typically measure our potential based on two factors: our past track record, and the size of the task ahead.¹

The trouble is that a person might even lack the ability to gauge potential, past track record, or the size of the task on an objective level. Anxiety is a deceiver and can distort the way a person views everything. Psalm 23 offers some insight into how we can attack anxiety and move toward victory.

- ❓ How clearly do you see barriers, opportunities, or challenges? Who can help you adjust your perspective to be more objective?
- ❓ Are there particular tasks or challenges you dread more severely than others? Why do you think that is so?

Session Summary

In this week's session, David opened what is perhaps the best-known psalm in Scripture by focusing on the scope of God's care for him. In doing so, he acknowledged God's supreme ability to not only know what was best for him, but to act accordingly. Understanding David's posture before God, as he recognized God's divine character, helps us to see the potential sources of anxiety against the same spiritual backdrop.

1. God is Sufficient (Psalm 23:1)

The straightforward assurance of the author in verse 1 indicated a history of trusting God, which had resulted in a tested confidence. According to Allen Ross, "The psalm is written as a song of confident trust in the LORD and gives every indication it represented an individual's personal faith."² Though the author was never specifically introduced, Davidic authorship is almost universally ascribed. David's thoughts centered on the ceaseless love of God and the benefits therein for the beloved.

David's meditations on the Lord were personal and experiential. He knew and had experienced the LORD as his shepherd. It was particularly noteworthy that David spoke of God using the covenant name Yahweh. Doing so immediately communicated intimacy with the Almighty. David was not reliant upon the god of that country; he relied on God with whom he had numerous faith experiences. David had learned to discern His character, anticipate to some degree how He would move, and most importantly to this text, how to trust Him.

David's equation of God's divine love as being that of a shepherd was selected because of David's own well-documented work as a shepherd. David knew how he guarded his own flocks in his youth. He remembered the sacrifices and hardships of leading animals that were, at times, not all that fond of being led. Speaking from his own experiences, David painted a picture of how he had experienced the love of God personally.

- ❓ What sort of experiences would you expect to encounter in order to arrive at a place where you could say that the Lord is your Shepherd? How have you seen Him in that light in your journey with Him so far?

The Unnamed Enemies of Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is particularly difficult to categorize because of the lack of specificity of what is described. For instance, the enemies spoken of could have been anything from any season of David's life. No specific crisis is given or referenced. The lack of detail has historically made the psalm easily applicable to the circumstances of many believers' lives. Many scholars believe "the psalm belongs to the time of the rebellion under Absalom." Such an assertion was based on the similarities to Psalm 3 in the reference to the wilderness.³



Application: What things in the world try to tell you what you "need?" How have you noticed those voices and outlets impacting your anxiety level?

How incredible, then, for David to have surmised all of his experience with God to this point and resolve that "I have what I need." From all his trials, even going back to his actual shepherd days in which God repeatedly rescued him from danger (1 Samuel 17:34), David's reflections summarily led him to the one fact that God was enough. Ross comments, "As a shepherd feeds the sheep, so the Lord provides spiritual food for the spiritual growth of his people, often through His servants who are also called shepherds. . . . Here David affirms that there is no lack or deficiency in the Lord's provision."⁴ As a result of God's provision and guidance in David's life, he lacked nothing for which he had genuine need. The measure of peace and comfort that accompanied that statement was the source of David's resolve and strength found repeatedly throughout his example on the pages of Scripture.

2. God Leads to Peace (Psalm 23:2-3a)

David had in mind the lush, green meadows of springtime at the writing of verse 2. Not only was God's provision enough, from verse 1, His provision was of great quality. Ross notes, "A shepherd regularly leads the sheep to lie down in such grassy meadows. This. . .underscores the truth that God was at work in David's life, leading him to the best provisions where he can 'feed' to his heart's content."⁵ The lush green pastures would have met multiple needs, but primarily those of hunger and the need for rest. Those shepherded by the Lord would not struggle to find the occasional sprig of grass pushing through parched soul. Nor would the Lord's flock feel the rocky soil as they sought needed relief from fatigue. Rather, the picture painted by David was one of care and blessing, where needs were met with abundance and lavish grace. There was no evidence or hint of scarcity. There was no need to claw and scratch to meet those needs. When God leads His sheep, there is peace.

He Lets Me Lie Down

The word for "lets" is causative in nature, which means God, as the Shepherd, leads His people in such a way that He brings about their lying down in green pastures at the most advantageous time. When that time comes, He guides His sheep into lying down to be refreshed and have their needs met.

Still, there was more at stake than the meeting of physical need. Spurgeon commented "What are these 'green pastures' but the Scriptures of truth—always fresh, always rich, and never exhausted? Sweet and full are the doctrines of the gospel. . . . When by faith we are enabled to find rest in the promises, we are like the sheep that lie down in the midst of the pasture."⁶ The spiritual food of God's Word, revealing God's character and grace to His people, nourished the soul so that believing His promises and His provision was possible for the one who learned the voice of his or her Shepherd.



What does the lavish nature of God's provision tell you about His love and care for you? Why is that important to remember, particularly in anxious seasons?



Application: How do we seek to renew our own lives? In your experience, how long do those benefits last? How would the result be different than what David described?

When David transitioned to the next metaphor of God leading His sheep to quiet waters, the idea was two-fold: the cleansing of the sheep and their refreshing. The addition of the descriptor that the waters were quiet emphasized the peace and safety of God’s divine refreshing. The practical application of doing so, according to the shepherd metaphor, was that the sheep were taken to calm waters with no rushing current. While there, they were cleansed from dirt as well as having wounds cleansed and dressed to prevent infection or eventual disability.

The idea of spiritual cleansing was made more obvious with David’s next phrase, “He renews my life.” The word used for “renew” could also mean “repent;” restoration was in mind here. God is not interested in merely dressing physical wounds and meeting physical needs. Rather, the manner in which He shepherded David—and, by implication, all of His people—intends to bring about restoration and wholeness. The wounds that the world would inflict through temptation, brutality, and greed meet their cure in the restoration offered by the Good Shepherd. Where life seeks to chip away security, faith, and peace, the Shepherd leads to their restoration.

3. God Leads for His Glory (Psalm 23:3b)

The notion of God leading along the right paths was predicated on God’s superior/divine insight into which paths were the right ones. At a basic level, what qualifies anyone to be a guide of anything is the fact that the guide knows the terrain and is an expert at navigating it. Applying that idea to David’s shepherd metaphor, David knew that God could and would lead him rightly, not just because He knew the right paths, but because He created everything that had ever existed. The Shepherd was the only trustworthy guide in existence.

The matter of how God leads His people has always been a sought-after answer. Perusing the corpus of the Old Testament, even those who, in hindsight, received an obvious call were often found seeking verification from God in the moment. The fact that God’s people were graced with the knowledge of His covenant name—Yahweh—was due to Moses seeking to verify who it was that was sending him, even while the flaming bush was not consumed in front of him.

The manner in which the sheep would discover whether or not a path was right was by observing where the path led. As it pertains to God in the shepherd metaphor, the right paths (or paths of righteousness

in other versions) are those paths that lead toward holiness and restoration. It would be impossible for God to ever lead someone toward unrighteousness; were David or anyone else to find themselves in such a trajectory, he or she could rest assured that it was not the Good Shepherd that was leading them.

- ❓ Describe a time when you realized you had gotten lost. What were the clues that led you to that realization? What did you do to correct course?
- ❓ Application: What evaluation would you give the shepherd you're following now? What roads have you been led to? Do you know The Shepherd, or are you just following a shepherd?

David concluded this section with the reminder that God did these things “for His name’s sake.” In the ancient world, a shepherd’s reputation was dependent on his ability to lead a flock home. That would certainly apply to God in an eschatological view. The reason for Christ coming in the first place was to ensure that God’s flock arrived home as they were supposed to be. God’s reputation and renown as a faithful covenant keeper is eternally important to Him. He is lovingly unwilling, then, to let even one of His sheep go astray. Instead, He leads them all home, mindful of every single one.

Conclusion

Throughout his life, David had a repeated and sometimes constant cause for anxiety and worry. It was from this experience that he penned this psalm after meditating on what the love of God had meant to him throughout all of those experiences. There are certainly critical points of application as believers face their own bouts of anxiety.




First, knowing God is foundational to experiencing Him as our Shepherd. David had a long history with God all the way back to his childhood. That history was filled with moments in which his very life was dependent on God’s intervention. He had, as a result, developed a robust knowledge of and trust in God. Anxiety seeks to undermine any sense of security a person clings to. Knowing God through the study of His Word, the practice of spiritual disciplines (prayer, fasting, biblical community), and worship grounds the believer in the One who is faithful and never leaves or forsakes. He wants you to know Him.

Second, we must evaluate who we are following and where it is taking us. If you are on right paths, those paths will lead toward Christlikeness. Those paths lead toward peace and quiet waters, to use David’s term. If

those terms do not describe your current locale, evaluating who or what is leading is crucial. Unrighteous paths cannot ever lead to righteous places. Who is in the lead?

Third, God's provision is better than the world's bribe. There are more ways to meet one's own needs than ever before in history; and it is all instant. The lure of sacrificing a legitimate need for an indulgent want is ubiquitous. Those wants have a way of taking control and seeking to define who a person is and how a person can be "happy." The trap is that none of it offers contentment. God's provision meets the greatest need anyone has--to know the Shepherd.

Fourth, because anxiety disrupts one's ability to see clearly, it is critical to be in biblical community with trusted believers who can help one another assess things biblically and rightly. Those brothers and sisters in Christ that walk with a person offer biblical perspective and health, which can rescue one who is spinning in circular, anxious thought.

-  How readily can you identify the things that cause you anxiety? Who do you trust to talk with about it? How often do you talk with them?
-  Looking at your life situation right now, who would you say you're following based on your location? Are you on a right path or a wrong one?
-  Chronicle some of your most significant spiritual moments with God. How has He shepherded you in those times? How does it confirm that God never loses sight of us?

Prayer of Response

Close in prayer, thanking God that we can rest from our anxieties because He is faithfully leading us in every moment.

Additional Resources

- *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* by W. Phillip Keller
- *Safe in the Shepherd's Arms* by Max Lucado
- *Life Without Lack* by Dallas Willard

For Next Week

Session Title

- Dealing With Depression

Main Passages

- Psalm 23:4; 1 Kings 19:1-18

Session Outline

1. Valleys are Part of Following God (Psalm 23:4a; 1 Kings 19:1-4, 10)
2. God's Presence Never Wavers in the Valley (Psalm 23:4b; 1 Kings 19:5, 11-13)
3. God Acts on Behalf of the Valley Traveler (Psalm 23:4c; 1 Kings 19:15-18)

Memorize

¹ *The Lord is my shepherd;*

I have what I need.

² *He lets me lie down in green pastures;*

he leads me beside quiet waters.

³ *He renews my life;*

he leads me along the right paths

for his name's sake.

- Psalm 23:1-3

Daily Readings

- Monday - Philippians 4:6-7
- Tuesday - Matthew 6:25-34
- Wednesday - 1 Peter 5:6-7
- Thursday - John 14:27-29
- Friday - Joshua 1:9
- Saturday - 2 Timothy 1:7

Extended Commentary

Psalm 23:1-3

23:1a. David began this psalm by introducing the first metaphor that describes the relationship between the Lord and his people with the tender analogy of a shepherd and his flock. During his youth David had been a shepherd watching his father's flock (1 Sam. 16:11,19; 17:15), so he was very familiar with this picture. Transferring the image to God, he declared, The Lord is my shepherd. The word my emphasizes how deeply personal and close was his individual relationship with God. Everything in the next four verses flows out of this shepherd motif.

What is so amazing is that in ancient Israel, a shepherd's work was considered the lowest of all work. A shepherd would actually live with his sheep twenty-four hours a day with unwavering devotion, day and night, both in fair weather and bad, to nurture, guide, and protect his sheep. The shepherd would assume full responsibility for the needs and safety of his flock, even risking his own life for their protection. This is what God has chosen to be to his people (cp. Pss. 28:9; 74:1; 77:20; 78:52; 79:13; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3). He is their everything, their constant protector.

23:1b. Because of the greatness of God and his constant, loving care over his flock, David concluded, I shall not be in want. Left to themselves, sheep lack everything, being totally helpless and defenseless animals who cannot care for themselves. But under the shepherd's care, all their needs are abundantly met. So it was for David, as well as for all believers who are under the watchcare of him who is all-sufficient, inexhaustible, and unchanging. All G's sheep, precious to him, shall not be in want. They will lack nothing that is good and necessary for enjoying life to the fullest.

23:2. Continuing the shepherd's theme, David boasted, He makes me lie down in green pastures. Sheep are fearful animals, easily panicked and, when scared, will not lie down to rest. Only the shepherd can provide the calm assurance to make them lie down in green pastures or grassy meadows. This speaks of the peace and true satisfaction that only God can provide his sheep.

What is more, David said, he leads me beside quiet waters. Literally, this refers to waters that have been stilled, further expanding this peaceful scene. Weary and worn sheep need a long, refreshing drink from the rapid stream. But being instinctively afraid of running water, the shepherd must pick up a few large stones and dam up a place, causing the rushing stream to slow its current and create quiet waters. Then the flock may drink with no fear. God gives true, abiding peace to believers who abide in him and drink of his grace.

23:3a. Moreover, this good shepherd restores my soul. This statement is subject to different interpretations. It may picture the straying sheep being brought back to the fold (cp. Isa. 49:5; Ps. 60:1). In Hebrew vernacular these words can mean “brings to repentance” or “brings to conversion” (cp. Hos. 14:1-3; Joel 2:12). Psalm 19:7 uses this same wording to picture the spiritual renewal or revival of a believer. But since the word for soul (Heb. *nephesh*) is accurately translated “life,” this may mean that the Lord restores the psalmist to physical health. Either interpretation is certainly true.

23:3b-c. Furthermore, David wrote, the Lord guides me in paths of righteousness. Unlike other animals sheep lack a sense of direction and can become easily lost, even in the most familiar environment. They easily go astray as they are prone to wandering. The shepherd must continually guide them to paths of righteousness, or “the right path,” if they are to be moved from field to field without falling into deep crevices or off ragged cliffs.

Likewise, God by his Word and Spirit guides his flock effectively in the right way. All this God does for his name’s sake, meaning for the honor of his own glory, which is the highest of all his motives. Even when believers sin, God is committed to leading them back to the right path.⁷

References

1. “I Can’t Do It.” PaulTripp.com. Accessed October 30, 2019. <https://www.paultripp.com/wednesdays-word/posts/i-cant-do-it>.
2. Ross, Allen P. *A Commentary on the Psalms, vol. 1 (1-41)*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 2011.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Spurgeon, Charles Haddon. *The Treasury of David: Classic Reflections on the Wisdom of the Psalms, vol. 1*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2014.
7. Lawson, Steven J., and Max Anders. *Psalms 1-75*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003.