

Shepherding Sermons



The Shepherd Who Does Not Rush You

A Reflection on Psalm 23

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Introduction

There is a particular kind of anxiety that settles over many believers, and it arrives quietly—often without announcement.

It is not the anxiety of crisis or emergency. It is slower than that. More persistent. It is the feeling that you are falling behind spiritually. That other Christians are further along. That your faith should be stronger by now, your prayer life more consistent, your understanding of Scripture more complete.

You look around and see people who seem certain. Who pray with confidence. Who speak about God as though the relationship is easy, natural, unforced. And you wonder what you are missing. Why your own faith feels so much more fragile. Why trust does not come as readily as it seems to for others.

This anxiety does not announce itself loudly. It hums beneath the surface of your spiritual life, shaping the way you pray, the way you read Scripture, the way you evaluate your own faithfulness. It makes rest feel like negligence. It makes stillness feel like falling behind. It turns faith into a race you are losing without ever having agreed to run.

Many believers carry this weight without naming it. They assume it is simply part of what it means to take faith seriously. That if they are anxious about their spiritual progress, at least they care. That urgency, even when it is exhausting, is better than apathy.

But what if the anxiety itself is not a sign of faithfulness? What if the pressure to keep up, to measure up, to be further along than you are—what if that pressure was never meant to govern your relationship with God?

Psalm 23 offers a different picture. Not one that eliminates responsibility or minimizes growth, but one that refuses to let fear set the pace. It describes a Shepherd who leads without rushing. Who provides without demanding. Who remains present even when progress feels slow.

This reflection sits with that image. Not to resolve the anxiety quickly, and not to dismiss the desire for growth. But to notice how easily the pressure to keep up can replace the quiet trust that Scripture invites.

Main Reflection

The fear of falling behind spiritually is not irrational. It is rooted in real concern. You care about your faith. You want to grow. You want your relationship with God to be more than nominal, more than a set of beliefs you inherited but never inhabited.

And so you watch. You watch how others pray. You watch how they speak about Scripture. You watch how they navigate difficulty with what appears to be unwavering trust. And you compare. Not because you want to be judgmental, but because you want to know: Am I doing this right? Am I where I should be?

The comparison rarely brings peace. It usually produces one of two responses: either you feel inadequate, or you feel superior. And neither response reflects the kind of relationship Psalm 23 describes.

When you feel inadequate, you begin to believe that your faith is less valid because it is less developed. That your prayers are insufficient because they are not eloquent. That your trust is weak because it is not constant. And so you try harder. You add more practices. You create structures meant to produce the growth you believe you are missing.

But the trying itself can become exhausting. Because when growth is measured by constant progress, rest feels like regression. When faithfulness is defined by always moving forward, stillness feels like failure. And eventually, the pursuit of spiritual maturity begins to look less like trust and more like striving.

When you feel superior, the anxiety shifts but does not disappear. You may feel that you are further along than others. That your understanding is more complete. That your faith is more serious. But the need to maintain that position creates its own pressure. You must continue to prove—both to yourself and to others—that you are still ahead. That your progress is real. That you have not slipped.

Both responses—inadequacy and superiority—share the same root: the belief that your relationship with God is primarily about where you are on some invisible scale of spiritual maturity. And that belief, no matter how sincere, misunderstands what Psalm 23 is describing.

The Shepherd in this psalm does not hurry His sheep. He does not measure their progress. He does not compare them to one another. He simply leads. And the leading is not a race. It is presence.

This does not mean growth does not matter. It does not mean progress is irrelevant. But it does mean that the Shepherd's care is not contingent on your performance. That His provision is not

withheld until you prove you deserve it. That His presence is not something you earn by being further along than you were yesterday.

And yet, the pressure to keep up persists. Not because Scripture demands it, but because fear insists on it. Fear cannot tolerate stillness. It cannot trust that presence is enough. It requires measurement, comparison, and constant forward motion—because without those things, fear has nothing to hold onto.

The question, then, is not whether you should desire growth. The question is whether the growth you are pursuing is being shaped by trust or by fear. Because the two produce very different kinds of faith.

Trust allows for seasons of stillness without interpreting them as failure. It allows for questions without treating them as threats. It allows for slower progress without assuming something has gone wrong.

Fear, by contrast, interprets every pause as falling behind. Every question as dangerous doubt. Every season of difficulty as evidence that you are not trying hard enough.

And the exhausting part is that fear disguises itself as faithfulness. It tells you that anxiety about your spiritual state is proof that you care. That urgency is evidence of seriousness. That constant evaluation is the mark of someone who takes God seriously.

But Psalm 23 does not describe a Shepherd who relates to His sheep through anxiety. It describes a Shepherd who knows when they need to rest and makes them lie down. Who leads them beside still waters because He understands that refreshment requires calm. Who restores their souls not once but continually, because restoration is part of the journey.

The Shepherd is not anxious about His sheep's progress. And perhaps that means His sheep are not meant to be anxious either.

Scripture Deep Dive

Psalm 23:1–3 says:

"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."

The opening verse is often quoted, but its meaning can be easily missed. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." This is not a statement about the absence of desire. It is a statement about provision. The psalmist is saying: because the Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing essential. My needs are met. My care is secure.

This does not mean life is without difficulty. The psalm acknowledges valleys, enemies, and darkness. But it locates those realities within a larger truth: the Shepherd is present. And His presence changes what it means to walk through difficulty.

The second verse introduces rest: "He makes me lie down in green pastures." The language is gentle but firm. The Shepherd does not merely suggest rest. He makes it happen. And the reason is simple: sheep, when left to themselves, will not rest. They will graze until they are anxious, until they are exhausted, until they cannot sustain themselves. The Shepherd knows this. And so He intervenes—not harshly, but with the kind of care that refuses to let His sheep destroy themselves through restlessness.

This image is deeply countercultural to the anxiety many believers carry. Because the anxiety says: if you rest, you are falling behind. If you stop, you are failing. If you are not constantly growing, you are regressing.

But the Shepherd says: lie down. Rest is not failure. It is provision. You are not falling behind when you rest. You are being cared for.

The third verse continues: "He leads me beside still waters." Not rushing waters. Not turbulent streams. Still waters. Places where drinking is safe. Where chaos is absent. Where the sheep can be refreshed without fear.

This, too, resists the urgency many believers feel. Because urgency thrives in turbulence. It insists that faith must always be active, always moving, always pressing forward. But the Shepherd leads beside still waters—because refreshment requires stillness. And stillness requires trust.

The verse ends with restoration: "He restores my soul." Not once, but continually. The Shepherd does not lead you forward and then leave you to maintain what you have gained. He restores. Again and again. Because restoration is part of the journey, not a failure that interrupts it.

And finally: "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." The leading is not random. It is purposeful. But the purpose is not your performance. It is His name. His character. His faithfulness. The path is one of righteousness, but the righteousness is not something you manufacture through constant striving. It is something He leads you into—for His sake, not yours.

This psalm does not describe a Shepherd who demands constant progress. It describes a Shepherd who provides, who leads, who restores, and who remains present even when the path is difficult. And nowhere in this psalm is there a suggestion that the sheep are responsible for keeping up, for proving their worth, or for measuring their spiritual advancement.

The Shepherd leads. The sheep follow. And the following is marked by trust, not by anxiety about whether they are doing it correctly.

What makes this psalm so countercultural is not what it says about the Shepherd—most believers would affirm that God is good, caring, and present. What makes it countercultural is what it does not say about the sheep.

It does not say the sheep must earn the Shepherd's care. It does not say they must prove themselves worthy of green pastures or still waters. It does not suggest that restoration is conditional on performance.

The psalm simply describes what the Shepherd does—and invites the sheep to trust that He is doing it.

Discussion Questions

1. When have you felt the pressure to be "further along" spiritually than you are? What does that pressure tell you about how you understand your relationship with God?
2. How does the image of the Shepherd making the sheep lie down challenge or comfort the way you think about rest in your spiritual life?
3. In what ways have you been measuring your faith? What would it look like to trust the Shepherd's presence instead of evaluating your own progress?
4. Where in your life does fear set the pace instead of trust? How might Psalm 23 speak into that space?
5. What would change if you believed that restoration is part of the journey, not evidence of failure?

Prayer & Application

Shepherd God,

You do not rush us. You do not measure our progress before deciding whether we are worthy of Your care. You lead beside still waters, and You restore what is worn down.

We confess that we have often lived as though faith is a race. As though rest is negligence. As though we must prove ourselves in order to be loved by You.

Forgive us for the ways we have allowed fear to set the pace. Teach us to trust Your presence more than our performance. Help us to lie down when You make space for rest. Help us to drink from still waters without anxiously looking ahead to what comes next.

We do not know how to measure faith without measuring ourselves. We do not know how to grow without striving. But You do. And so we ask: lead us. Not faster. Not further. Just lead us. And let that be enough.

In the name of Christ, who is Himself the Good Shepherd. Amen.

A Quiet Invitation

If this reflection has named something you are carrying, you are not alone. Many believers live with the quiet fear that they are falling behind. That their faith is not strong enough. That they should be further along by now.

But the Shepherd described in Psalm 23 does not relate to His sheep through measurement. He relates to them through presence. And His presence is not contingent on how well you are performing or how far you have progressed.

You do not have to be further along in order to rest in His care. You do not have to prove yourself in order to receive His provision. You simply have to trust that He is present—and that His presence is enough.

This week, when the anxiety of falling behind presses in, return to Psalm 23. Read it slowly. Not as a standard to meet, but as a description of the Shepherd who is already with you. And allow that presence to be the measure of your faith—not your progress, not your performance, but His faithfulness.

Because He does not rush you. He leads you. And that leading, even when it is slow, is not failure. It is care.

Next Steps

If you would like to continue reflecting on faith without fear, we invite you to:

- Read Psalm 23 slowly throughout the week, noticing where resistance or relief surfaces
- Consider journaling about the difference between trust-shaped growth and fear-shaped striving
- Visit shepherdingministry.org for additional resources on Scripture, conscience, and fear-free faith

These reflections are offered as companions for the journey, not instructions for arriving. You are welcome to take what is helpful and leave what is not. There is no urgency. No deadline. No pressure to have everything figured out.

The Shepherd who does not rush you is the same Shepherd who will continue to lead, restore, and remain present—whether you feel like you are keeping pace or not.

About This Series

Shepherding Sermons is a weekly series of short pastoral reflections written for those who want to take Scripture seriously without living anxiously before God.

This series is rooted in the conviction that fear was never meant to govern faith. Scripture invites trust, responsibility, and honest relationship with God—without pressure, panic, or coercion. Each sermon is shaped to be read slowly, with care for those who have been worn down by fear-based teaching or who are learning to trust God again.

Shepherding Sermons does not aim to argue, persuade, or rush spiritual conclusions. It returns again and again to Scripture read in context, allowing God's character—revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ—to remain central. Where faithful Christians have disagreed, this series seeks clarity without hostility and conviction without fear.

These reflections are offered as companions rather than instructions. They are meant to create space for steady faith, thoughtful obedience, and repentance without shame. No urgency is demanded. No emotional response is required.

If you are tired, uncertain, or quietly rebuilding trust, you are welcome here. This series is written to walk alongside—not to drive forward.

Additional resources and related teachings can be found at shepherdingministry.org