

God's presence in our struggles at work (Psalm 23)

"The Lord is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1). If we trust God, we have the tranquility of knowing that God watches over us, like a shepherd watching over the sheep. This is a reminder to see our work from God's perspective—not primarily as an instrument for our gratification, but as our part in God's mission in the world. "He leads me in the right *for his name's sake*" (Ps. 23:3, emphasis added). We work to honor him and not for our own glory—a powerful reminder that we need to hear on a regular basis.

Such a godly perspective on our work generally drives us *into* our work more deeply, not away from it. In Psalm 23, we see this in the way the narrative of the Psalm is driven by the details of the work of shepherding. Shepherds find water, good grazing and paths in the wilderness. They ward off predators with sticks and staffs, and comfort the sheep with their words and their presence. Psalm 23 is first of all an accurate representation of the shepherd's work. This gives it the grounding in reality needed to be meaningful as a spiritual meditation.

While we seek to honor God in our work, this does not mean the road will be easy. We sometimes may find ourselves in the "darkest valley" (Ps. 23:4). This could come as the loss of a contract, a teaching assignment that has gone bad, or feelings of isolation and meaninglessness in our work. Or it could come as a longer-term struggle, such as a toxic office environment or inability to find a job. These are things we'd prefer to avoid. But Psalm 23 reminds us that God is near in all circumstances. "I fear no evil for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4a). His work on our behalf is not hypothetical, but tangible and real. A shepherd has a rod and staff, and God has every instrument needed to bring us safely through the worst of life (Ps. 23:4b). God will take care of us even in a sometimes-hostile world, "in the presence of my enemies" (Ps. 23:5). It is easy to remember this when things are calm, but here we are called to remember it in the midst of the challenge and adversity. While we would often rather not think about this, it is through the challenges of our lives that God works out his purposes in us.

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Psalm 23 concludes by reminding us of the destination of our journey with God. "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps 23:6b). As in Psalm 127 [WGM1] and elsewhere, the house or household is not only a shelter where people eat and sleep, but the basic unit of work and economic production. Thus, dwelling in the house of the Lord does not mean waiting until we die to so that we can cease working and receive our reward. Rather it promises that the time is coming when we will find a place where our work and life can thrive. The first half of the verse tells us directly that this is a promise for

our present lives as well as eternity. “Goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life” (Ps. 23:6). The promise that God will be with us, bringing goodness and love in all of the circumstances of our life and work is a deeper kind of comfort than we can ever get from hoping to avoid every adversity that could befall us.
