

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 11, 2025**

**“Shall Not Want”
Psalm 23**

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For many, the 23rd Psalm is one of the most familiar passages in Scripture. And sometimes, when a passage becomes very familiar, it's helpful to slow down and focus in on one verse or one detail—discovering there something new in God's Word. And this morning, I'd like to focus in on these words from our psalm: “I shall not want.”

Now, how this is usually translated into English, it can lead to a bit confusion. The way we typically use the word ‘want,’ we mean that we desire something. ‘I *want* to find a job in my field,’ someone could say. But the way the word is used in our psalm, it's a meaning of ‘want’ that's not very common nowadays; it's a slightly archaic use of the word meaning ‘to lack [...] something’ (OED). And this can cause some misunderstanding; once, at a previous church, I was leading a Bible Study on this Psalm, and I learned that some participants had thought that “I shall not want” was about not “wanting” too much, about not desiring more that one should.

So to be clear, the Hebrew word here (חָסַר) means to ‘lack [or] need’ (Brown-Driver-Briggs), to be ‘lacking [or] wanting’ (Pratico). Some English translations avoid the confusion by translating it as “I lack nothing” (NIV) or “I will never be in need” (CEV). Now, that reduces the potential confusion, yet—at the same time—it introduces a whole different set of questions. Did the psalmist really never lack anything? Have the many generations of Jews—and later also Christians—who've recited this psalm never been in need? When we recite this psalm, what are really we saying? In what way do we lack nothing?

And the question becomes all the more pressing when we recall that we very often recite this psalm...during our hour of greatest need! I have almost always included this psalm in funerals; “I shall not want,” I've read from the pulpit in the presence of many who are in desperate *need* of comfort. I have read this psalm by the bedside of someone dying in hospital; “I shall not want,” I've said, as death draws near. We recite this psalm when we are in need, when we are in want; what then do we mean when we say, “[we] shall not want”?

I'd like to explore this question—what the psalm means by declaring “I shall not want”—I'd like to explore this in two ways: first by looking at how the original Hebrew word is used elsewhere in the Old Testament—and then seeing how that fits with the rhythm of the poetry of this psalm.

In our psalm, the Hebrew word for “I shall not want” or “I shall not be lacking”—the word (רָצוּן), pronounced *chaser*—this word is used in the Old Testament in the context of God's care for the Israelites in the wilderness. And as it turns out, the word is often about the Israelites *not* being in need, *not* being in want. In the Book Exodus, in the story of the manna—the bread from heaven that God gave in the wilderness—we find this same Hebrew word when we read that the Israelites received all they needed: “those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little,” it says, using the same word from our psalm, “had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed” (16:18). With the gift of manna, *they did not want*.

Later, at the end of the Israelites' decades in the wilderness, Moses reminds the people that God had cared for them all those years: “Surely the LORD your God has blessed you in all your undertakings,” Moses says. “These forty years the LORD your God has been with you,” he says; then he adds, using the same word we find in our psalm, “you have lacked nothing” (Deuteronomy 2:7; cf. Nehemiah 9:21). In the wilderness, *they did not want*.

And at the end of that journey, Moses also assured the Israelites that God would provide for them in the promised land. Moses says: “For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where” Moses says, again using the same word we find in our psalm, “you will lack nothing” (Deuteronomy 8:7-9). In the promised land, Moses tells the Israelites, *they shall not want*.

These examples (cf. Psalm 34:10, Isaiah 51:14) give us a sense of the pattern. In the 23rd Psalm, the Hebrew word that means ‘to be lacking’—this word is used in the Old Testament to describe God's care for the Israelites in the wilderness. And although the word means ‘to be lacking,’ it's often used to remember what the Israelites did *not* lack in the wilderness. As God led the Israelites from Egypt and across the wilderness and into the promised land, they did not lack what they needed; that is, as the Lord shepherded the Israelites, *they did not want*.

However, that's not to say that, in the wilderness, the Israelites didn't encounter challenges and struggles, heartache and anxiety, setbacks and reversals; of course they did! When we read the biblical accounts of their journey across the wilderness, it's clear that it was difficult—that it required the Israelites, in the midst of need, to trust in the Lord. Yet in the end, they found that their trust in God was not in vain; as God shepherded them from Egypt to the promised land, God cared for them faithfully, providing them what they needed for the journey, so that they did not want.

Now keep all this in mind as we turn for a moment to how the poetry of the Psalms works. In the original Hebrew, the Psalms do not rhyme—at least, they don't rhyme with sounds (like cat and hat, boat and goat). Instead, the Psalms rhyme with echoing images, with echoing thoughts, with echoing meanings. In the Psalms, two or three lines will be connected—not by the sounds of the words so much as the meaning of the words.

So sometimes, two lines will express the same thought, but a little differently; for example:

“The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it” (24:1).

Sometimes, two lines will express a contrast, “an opposite thought,” like this:

“Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God” (20:7).

And sometimes—and this is important for our verse today—sometimes one line “explains the meaning of the first line,” elaborating and enlarging on what the other line means (deClaissé-Walford).

And that last one—that's the kind of rhyming meaning that we find at the beginning of Psalm 23: “I shall not want” does not stand alone, but is paired with the first half of that verse: “The LORD is my shepherd.” In the poetry of the psalms, these two lines don't rhyme with sound; they rhyme with meaning. What does it mean that “The LORD is my shepherd”? It means “I shall not want.” Why can we declare, “I shall not want”? Because “The LORD is my shepherd.”

In the wilderness, the Israelites discovered that, with God as their shepherd, they did not lack what they needed. As the psalmist says elsewhere:

“he led out his people like sheep,
and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.
He led them in safety, so that they were not afraid” (78:52-53).

In the wilderness, the Israelites learned that having God as their shepherd meant that that they did not want, and they did not want because the Lord was their shepherd.

And the 23rd Psalm affirms this trust in God simply and beautifully by joining together these interwoven declarations of faith: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want” / “I shall not want, the Lord is my shepherd.” Then the rest of the psalm tells what it means to know the care of God the shepherd, the One who leads us and restores us, who stays with us and comforts us in the darkest valley, who strengthens us in the midst of struggles until our cup overflows, the One whose goodness and mercy follow us always.

This week, I invite you to reflect on the first verse of the 23rd psalm. As you go about your days, let this verse be a refrain, and let it echo in your mind, so that you may remember and reflect on what it means to be in the Shepherd’s care. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Amen.