

Psalm for a Summer Season (3): Psalm 23

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[0 : 0 0] Of all the songs we sing, Psalm 23 is the most famous.! Seared into the national consciousness of Scotland, it's the first learned, oftenest repeated,! and last remembered. We might say of Isaiah 53 that it's the greatest of prophecies.

We might say of the parable of the prodigal son that it's the greatest of parables, and in the same way we can say of this psalm, Psalm 23, it's the greatest of psalms.

Now, we don't know at what point of his life King David wrote Psalm 23, but we do know that in his younger years, David had been a shepherd, and perhaps he's looking back as an old man, and he's comparing the journey of his life with God rather like he, as a young man, used to shepherd the flocks of his father. Psalm 23 is placed between two other famous psalms. Psalm 22 is often called the Psalm of the Sufferer, where the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ is described in terms of him as the King of glory, being welcomed in through the gates of heaven with great splendor, and then sitting on the throne of majesty. Between these two psalms, the Psalm of the Sufferer and the Psalm of the Sovereign, we have Psalm 23, the Psalm of the Shepherd.

This psalm is the story of God's goodness to us throughout our lives, his loving and skillful shepherding of his people. The Psalm begins with the words, the Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd. In the Israel of the day, the title shepherd was used not just to describe those whose job it was to look after sheep, but it was also used to describe the King of Israel. The King was the shepherd of his people. And by saying, the Lord is my shepherd, David is using both meanings. The Lord as his shepherd, as we understand what a shepherd is with sheep, and the Lord as his King. The Lord as his shepherd, looking after him with all the love and skill of an earthly shepherd and an earthly king.

It is the Lord who is David's shepherd. You will notice that the word Lord is written in capital letters referring to the covenant name of God, God's personal name, as it were, the name Yahweh.

[3 : 1 1] It reminds us that this God is the God of covenant, committed love, unfaithful promise, the God who is utterly committed to the good of his people, the God who rescued them from their slavery in Egypt, the God who provided for them, protected them through their 40-year wilderness journey, the God who gave them the land of Canaan as the land of promise. He is the God of loving salvation, of determined promise, of determined promise, and of everlasting faithfulness.

As we move into the New Testament, we hear the Lord Jesus saying of himself, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Later on, Jesus is described by the apostle Peter as the chief shepherd, and then later by the writer of Hebrews as the great shepherd. In the book of Revelation, the exalted Lord Jesus is described in this way, the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd. The Lord who is our shepherd of Psalm 23 is Jesus Christ, the same Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us, the Jesus who loves us today and reigns today as heaven's king for us. Jesus is my shepherd.

He goes on to say, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Now, our translations aren't so helpful here because the word want has changed its meaning over the centuries. I prefer the Christian Standard Bible, the one that I use on my own devotions in its translation, the Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I lack. The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I lack. When the Lord is our shepherd, when Jesus is our shepherd, we have everything we need and there is nothing we lack. Our shepherd king provides everything for us, leaving nothing out of what we may need. Just like a shepherd ensures that his sheep are protected and provided for, so King Jesus ensures that we shall lack nothing in our lives, we shall want for nothing.

And perhaps this, more than anything else, is what makes this psalm so precious to us as Christians. Not just because it reminds us that Jesus is our shepherd, but it assures us that he holds us in the palms of his nail-pierced hands. He will never let us go.

The remainder of this psalm explains the five areas in which we shall not lack, in which we shall want for nothing. I shall not want physical, verse 2. I shall not want spiritually, verse 3. I shall not want in the bad times, verse 4. I shall not want in the good times, verse 5. I shall not want forever, verse 6. And we'll briefly go through each one of them. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

[6 : 29] He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters. I shall not want physically. I shall not want physically. The majority of sheep in Scotland are left to their own devices to find pasture and water in the hills. They're hardy. They're strong sheep. Whenever you go, however, to a lowland farm where the sheep are grazed on the finest grass, you'll often see a different kind of sheep. You can see that they're well fed by the structure of their bodies. Their shoulders are broad and their lambs put on weight very quickly. Sometimes in the north, when a river is in spate and it flows in torrents, when a sheep tries to cross that river, it will lose its footing. It's washed away to its death. A river in spate is very dangerous to a sheep who wants a drink.

But likewise, stagnant pools are filled with parasites, which harm the sheep's intestines and can kill them. The ideal is green pasture and fresh water. You can always tell a satisfied sheep which has access to green pasture and still water because it's lying down. It's had its fill.

It's well fed. It's well watered. It's satisfied. It lies down. Now, much of the land of Israel was wilderness, desert, and scrub. There wasn't much grass to eat, not much water to drink. The skillful shepherd needed to know where to find the greenest pasture and the still waters because their welfare was his responsibility. So, he knew where the hidden valleys were, and he knew where the secret springs were to be found, and so he would lead his sheep there. And he knew that his sheep were satisfied when they would lie down. They'd had enough to eat, enough to drink, so they'd lie down. Christ cares for us, soul and body. For we are human beings, soul and body. Our bodies matter to him. In the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, which we repeated a few minutes ago, in the first petition, which we pray for ourselves, before we pray anything spiritual, the first petition is, give us today our daily bread. Our good shepherd, who has laid down his life, soul and body, spiritual and physical, for his sheep, cares for our bodies. He will give us everything we need for life and health. Remember how he said, do not be anxious, saying, what shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or what shall we wear? For your heavenly Father knows you need them.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. The Lord who's our shepherd will provide for us, and not just enough, more than enough, so that we shall look at what we have and be satisfied with it. We shall lie down in contented satisfaction, knowing that our skillful and loving shepherd will provide, and more than enough, for our bodies, for our physical needs. I shall not want physically. Verse 3, I shall not want spiritually.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. I shall not want spiritually. The shepherd is many things to his sheep. He's their protector, their provider, his, and his presence with them makes them feel at ease. But he's also their guide. He's their leader.

[10 : 47] If they're going astray, he'll draw them back, and he'll keep them on the right path. He knows what dangers lie close to the road, so he'll ensure that they're far away from anything that could hurt them.

Not only does Jesus, our good shepherd, care for our bodies, he cares for our souls. There are, in our experience, many times when we go astray.

On the outside, we may look a picture of spiritual health, but on the inside, we know that we've grown spiritually cold. Our Bibles remain unopened. Our prayer lives are silent, and the warmth of our fellowship with God is but a memory. In times like these, what we sometimes call backsliding, we have the promise that our good shepherd will restore our souls. He'll restore us. He'll give us repentant hearts and bring us back to himself, because he knows what dangers lie ahead of us if we continue straying from him. As our good shepherd, he promises to lose none of those who have been given to him. Like the shepherd in Jesus' parable, he'll leave the 99 sheep in the fold, and in love, he'll go out looking for his lost sheep, and he won't stop until he finds us.

And then he'll lift us onto his shoulders, and he'll bring us home to himself. He'll bring us to our senses. He'll restore us. But having restored us, he'll lead us in paths of righteousness. By his Holy Spirit, he'll guide us away from sin and toward the holiness of grace and love. He'll make the Bible live for us again. He'll warm our hearts so we can pray as we ought to.

He'll draw us close so that we feel as though we may at times reach out and touch him. Walking in the footsteps of our master will walk in holiness, humility, and love. When we're doing badly, our Lord will restore us to himself. When we're doing well, it's because he's leading us in paths of righteousness, and he's doing it, as he says, for his name's sake, because his name is at stake in our perseverance and our spiritual well-being, for he has promised that he will not lose one of those he has been given. Well, having said that, that doesn't give us an excuse to willfully turn away from him.

[13 : 12] It is as we abide in Christ and follow him, we shall be safe and well. Third, I shall not want in the bad times, verse 4. I shall not want in the bad times, 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 isn't a Walt Disney movie. It ain't a cartoon.

There are dark and troubling movements too close for comfort. We all go through times of shadow, where the oppressive darkness crowds in upon us and we can't see light.

These are the valleys of the shadow of death. But notice a couple of things with me from the text itself. In this verse, David no longer speaks about God in the third person singular as he.

He is speaking to God in the first, second person plural, second person singular as you. In other words, David is no longer speaking about God. He doesn't feel he can anymore. The situation is so desperate that he is speaking only to God. And similarly, when times are tough for us, we find that refuge and comfort in speaking to God and him alone, and that is what we call prayer.

But notice also that David speaks about walking through the valley of the shadow of death, not in, through. Things we walk through, like the Clyde Tunnel, have a beginning and an end.

[14 : 59] These dark valleys we're experiencing, they had a beginning and they will have an end. They are not permanent. The end may not be in this life, but there will be an end to our darkness, and the dawn of the Son of Righteousness will come.

What are your dark valleys today? What are mine? Physical, mental illness, relationship, employment difficulties. Whatever they are, we need to know that our Shepherd King is with us, that Jesus, the Lord of Glory, is with us in the valley of our suffering. It may not seem that way, but the deep truth is that he knows the way we take because he's walking beside us on the way, and by his Spirit he is within us.

Kings belong in palaces filled with warmth and light, but our King is with us in the valleys of coldness and darkness. He's with us here, and he's with us with his guiding rod and his protecting staff, because the path to righteousness leads through this valley.

And yet the eyes of Christ are open to every danger, fighting off our enemies, making sure we don't stray from the path. When we're utterly helpless, he is our help. He'll be with us.

And he'll be the light at the end of the tunnel, where there are no more shadows. Whatever it is, take heart. Do not fear. There's nowhere we can go today where he's not been before us.

[16 : 58] He will never leave us, even in the darkest of shadows. And because he is with us, we shall lack nothing, not even here in the worst of times.

Fourth, verse 5, I shall not want in the good times. I shall not want in the good times. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

Like a scene shifting in a theatrical performance, the scene moves from the valley of the shadow of death into the throne room in a royal palace. The imagery moves from the shepherd, as we understand it, with sheep, to the king as the shepherd of his people.

David's no longer writing as a shepherd boy. He's writing as the king of Israel. God has prepared a banquet for him. And all his enemies, whoever they may be, are forced to watch on from the sidelines, defeated and envious.

They're watching David feasting on the richest of food, while they are hungry, jealous, and humiliated. Perhaps it was some of these enemies who had forced David to walk through the valleys of the shadow of death.

[18 : 19] But now the tables are turned, as they are forced to watch David's victory banquet. David's words here remind us somewhat of many of Jesus' parables, of how at the end times, those who are Christ's enemies will forever be shut out from his glorious banquet.

Whereas the outcast and the poor, whose life is one continual walking in the valleys of the shadow of death, will be shut in with him. David then speaks of his head being anointed with oil, the symbol of spiritual joy.

So recently troubled in the valley of the shadow of death, David is now being anointed with spiritual joy, the joy of knowing God, in the banqueting feast of the Lamb.

My cup overflows, he says. The cup of the Christian is not empty, it's not half filled, it's not full, it's overflowing. The paraphrase of this psalm, entitled, The King of Love My Shepherd Is, has a lovely line in it, I always try to remember.

I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine forever. With Christ as our shepherd, our cup overflows. All too often, we don't live as though we have Christ as a shepherd, and that his cup of goodness toward us is overflowing.

[19 : 49] Yes, these are the good times. Of course we go through bad times in life, but we also go through good times. And in these times, it's important to remember where these good times come from.

They're the gracious gifts of our shepherd king. In our days today, many people have begun, it's a good idea to keep what they call gratitude journals, where on a daily basis, they write down things for which they are thankful.

When I used to visit one of our older adherents, she'd always say to me in her beautiful accent, she'd always say, when I try to count my blessings, I run out of fingers, and I run out of toes.

What a great mindset. I shall not want in the good times. And then lastly, from verse 6, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

I shall not want forever. A great philosopher once said, life can only be understood backwards.

[21 : 03] Life can only be understood backwards. By definition, those things which follow you are behind you. Although at the time, life circumstances seem hard and painful, it's only when we look back, we begin to understand why God did it that way and how that way was the best way.

Who can forget Douglas Macmillan's famous image of goodness and mercy being like the shepherd's two faithful sheepdogs, gathering up the sheep behind him and bringing them to the shepherd.

As we look back in our lives, although we do not know everything and although we are still filled with questions and unresolved hurts, we know enough to know that Jesus has shepherded us his whole life through with his goodness and mercy.

And that in words they used of Jesus back then, he has done all things well. Perhaps you're going through a tough time right now.

Do not just look backwards. Live your life forwards. Because the day will come when you will look back and you will see God's goodness and mercy even in these days.

[22 : 33] And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever, David says. The job of building the temple in Jerusalem was left to David's son Solomon. And yet David had this in mind. A house for the Lord in which he would dwell.

A house David could go into and be close to the Lord. He expresses that desire in Psalm 27, verse 4. One thing I have asked of the Lord, that I will seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

David's greatest desire in life was to be close to God and to gaze upon God's beauty.

That's why he wanted to build a temple for God. We have a greater temple. We have the shepherd king, the Lord Jesus Christ, and we're promised that our future is greater and brighter than David could ever have dreamed.

We shall be with our shepherd king, Jesus. And we shall live with him forever. These all too fleeting experiences we have of intimacy with Christ are just a pale reflection of the unspeakable joy we shall have forever in the presence of our king in the new heavens and the new earth.

[24 : 03] The Lord, who's our shepherd, has left nothing to chance in our lives. He's with us every step of the way. He's not a stone's throw away. He's right beside us. And by his Holy Spirit, he's within us.

He has a human face, the Lord Jesus Christ, and nothing more can we need than he has, can, and will provide for us.

I shall not want physically, spiritually, in the bad times, in the good times, I shall not want forever. There's a good reason you see this psalm is the first learned, often repeated, and longest remembered.

There's a good reason it's often called the pearl of psalms. It's a diamond. If there is one psalm we should all memorize, it's Psalm 23.

Jesus is our good shepherd. Jesus, our good shepherd, laid down his life for the sheep, and he knows us by name. He loved us and gave himself for us.

[25 : 10] One last question for us all. David says, the Lord is my shepherd. My shepherd. He doesn't say, the Lord is our shepherd.

Or, the Lord is this shepherd. Or, the Lord is your shepherd. He says, the Lord is my shepherd. You see, it's a personal thing with David.

Is the Lord Jesus Christ your shepherd today? Up until now, perhaps, you've been a lost sheep, straying from him.

He invites you to answer his call. He invites you to join his flock. Will you have him as your shepherd so that you too can say, the Lord Jesus Christ is my shepherd.

Lord. Let us pray. Forgive us, O Lord, when we doubt you. We recognize that doubt and unbelief are part of what it means to have faith.

[26 : 18] But we thank you, Lord, that you give us the assurance in your word that if you are our shepherd, we shall lack for nothing. We pray that you would help us to lean on you today, to trust on you, even as a weary shepherd leans on his crook.

And we ask, Lord, that you would give us new eyes to see our shepherd king leading us to streams of living water in the new heavens and the new earth.

Amen.