

The Lord is my Shepherd

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[0 : 00] 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 namesake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Well, it's a real privilege to open Psalm 23 with you all this morning.

[1 : 08] It is a really precious passage, isn't it? It's one of the most instantly recognisable passages and familiar in all of Scripture. It's a passage that has been adopted by society by and large.

It's the most commonly read Bible passage at funerals of believers and, interestingly, of non-believers too. In an era when Christianity's claim to truth is increasingly on the nose, people who may never have been to church like the imagery of security found in Psalm 23.

And let's face it, beautiful images of prosperity and protection are hard to find offensive. But this widespread acceptance suggests to me that it's very commonly misunderstood.

Martin Luther described the Psalter as a little Bible and a summary of the whole Old Testament. Indeed, today as we walk through this psalm, we're going to be encouraged by God's redemptive sweep right across history.

As is progressively revealed throughout Scripture, in our privileged position, this side of Christ, we understand elements of this psalm more clearly than even David did himself.

[2 : 27] We're not going to have time to explore every aspect that's taught through this psalm, but rather, as we sweep across it, we're going to see the great hope it offers to all who submit themselves to Christ.

It's interesting. I hadn't spoken to Catherine about the reading this morning, but in reading from the message, she's nailed a very important point.

Now, I think the ESV's done a fantastic job in translating this familiar psalm to us and keeping a balance to making it accessible in English for us, but also keeping some of those words and phrases from which we're familiar.

Many people have memorised this psalm in older versions, and the ESV's kept some of those along. It's actually an older phrasing of the passage than most of the ESV translation.

Now, if you're thinking, oh, it's not so bad, I don't think it's really... What's he going on about? Think of the word shall. So it's a bit of a frivolous example. Shall pops up three times in the six verses of this psalm in the ESV.

[3 : 32] About six years ago, I swapped across to the dark side, and so my phone messages go back for six years. In that time, I've sent tens of thousands of texts. I've used the word shall once.

People have used the word shall to me in a text. Never. So there's something here to unlock. We just have to be a little bit careful. We're not imposing our own meaning on these terms because we're not as familiar with what was intended by the author.

So as we open it up, we'll reflect on what David was teaching here, first to the people of Israel, but then through Christ, for us. There is such a richness here that we will be left with a bigger view of our great God and comfort in our dependence upon him.

The opening phrase, the Lord is my shepherd. Immediately, there is a personal relationship on display here between David and the Lord. He uses God's name given to Israel.

Yahweh is my shepherd. Now, the shepherd imagery is very personal for David. He himself was a shepherd when he was chosen by the Lord to be king.

[4 : 45] It's no coincidence that Nathan uses a story of a lamb to confront David over his sin with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel. David can relate to this imagery. It's a claim to intimacy.

The use of a personally revealed name along with the claim of my personal ownership. Not in a general sense. And it's important because the shepherd imagery is also precious to all of Israel. It is used of God as he leads the Israelites out of Egypt and into the land flowing with milk and honey. It is because of this personal relationship with the Lord that the second half of verse 1 can exist.

I shall not want. Or a more modern term, I have all that I need. This personal relationship with our God is all it takes to have all we need.

It's quite a bold claim. It's a profound truth that we slip past in our familiarity all too easily. It's not the first time that this exact phrase is used in the biblical text. Moses, writing in Deuteronomy 2, speaking to the assembled Israelites in the desert, said, For the Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands.

[5 : 57] He has watched over your journey through this immense wilderness. The Lord your God has been with you these past 40 years and you have lacked nothing. You have lacked nothing.

I have all I need. It's a statement of God's provision. I call back to the bigger picture, putting David's relationship with his shepherd in the context of Israel's. As Israel was able to depend on the Lord for deliverance, here too, David affirms that the Lord as a shepherd is good.

He expresses assurance that he has what he needs purely because it is Yahweh that is his shepherd. David is writing an Exodus song in Psalm 23 and it's our song too because he is our ancestor in the faith.

Every time we sing the psalm, as we're going to a bit later this morning, we're looking back and celebrating the ultimate rescue that God provided for us, not just for the Israelites from Egypt, but for us in the Lord Jesus Christ, the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep.

In Christ we are assured that we have all we need. Then goes on in verse 2 and 3, 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.

[7 : 23] Just as for Israel, milk and honey was an image of bounty and security, here too, the green field and still waters are a symbol of ample provision and security under the Lord's guide.

But the metaphor is a bit dangerous for us. Grass and quiet streams are obviously bounty for sheep. But what does your mind go to? What does your heart go to when thinking of bountiful provision?

Is it a family feast? Or a big house? A fast car or a putable job? A large super balance? We are all really good at defining what our prosperity should look like.

Perhaps we're not so overtly worldly, but we too easily put good things into this ultimate category as well. Perhaps we're aspiring to a conflict-free and loving marriage.

Perhaps our hope is in healthy children. Or a good, even a godly reputation amongst our friends. None of these things are the good things promised in these verses.

[8 : 34] The Israelites, too, thought that God should deliver prosperity on their terms. And the Lord's provision chafed at them in the wilderness. They grumbled first against Moses, but also against God himself.

When God had brought them out of Egypt, that they might worship him. After the ten plagues, the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, after receiving water from the stone, manna, and then quail for their food, as soon as the scouts came back from the Promised Land, the people of Israel declare, why is the Lord bringing us into this land to die by the sword?

Our wives and children will become plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt? So they said to one another, let's appoint a leader and go back to Egypt. That's in Numbers 14.

Now it's often easier to see when someone else is being petty and seeking God only for what they can get from him. But this is far more of a mirror for ourselves than we can be truly comfortable with.

The truth that the Israelites missed in the desert, that David nails here in Psalm 23, and that we continue to struggle with, is that the greatest thing we can ever have is God himself.

[9 : 50] The most bountiful provision is to be given more access to God. Again and again before Pharaoh, Moses asked for release that they might worship their God.

The whole point of shepherding Israel out of Egypt was that he might be their God and they might be his people. How easily we think the point was to obtain a land flowing with milk and honey. In 2 Corinthians, a persecuted and suffering Paul writes of being as having nothing and yet possessing everything.

All he had was the Lord. The Lord was his shepherd. What more does he need? This is a profound point of the opening clause of the psalm.

It is not up to us to define what prosperity is. Nothing other than our God himself will restore our souls as we deeply crave. Now 3 verses 2 and 3, it becomes clear just how central the shepherd is to David's life.

[11 : 00] It is the shepherd that makes him lie down. The shepherd that leads to still waters. The shepherd restores his soul, giving him meaning. Like a central hub, all the aspects of David's life raiding out as the spokes of the wheel.

The Lord is central to this generous prosperity. Indeed, it is the Lord that defines what prosperity is. Are we ready to surrender our inclinations to define what our good ought to be and truly to surrender to the Lord as our shepherd?

Now the mechanism through this, which this is achieved, is through God's leading in right paths. And the motivation for this is the sake of the name of the Lord.

In Psalm 106, David returns to the metaphor to spell out again in more detail what God's faithful shepherding through Exodus looked like. In verses 7 and 8, Isaiah also reflects on the crossing of the Red Sea in chapter 63.

So you led your people to make for yourself a glorious name. God's right paths are best for us. But first and foremost, they are about his glory, not our own.

[12 : 32] And as we arrive at verse 4, the tense of the psalm changes. We move from reflection into the present. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Walking through the wilderness in Jeremiah is referred to as walking through the valley of shadow. But here it's been amped up a notch. What is going on? What happens to the promised green pastures and still waters?

It jars, doesn't it? We don't know when this psalm was written by David, but a lot of commentators point to a period when David was being hunted down by his son Absalom.

A son he loved, but a son who wanted him dead so that he could be king instead. David certainly knew what it was to walk surrounded by the shadow of death.

But the apparent clash here in verse 4 is largely one for our western eyes. We've been drawn into this psalm as a story. At first glance it has this classical story format.

[13 : 38] Begins with order and balance that is then removed. The order is restored by the hero and everyone lives happily ever after. But this is not a story. This is a song.

It's poetic prose. There are three scenes in this psalm and all three are true concurrently at the same time, not sequentially one after the other. When we view it like a story we end up with the conclusion that the only point of all of this is to get to heaven.

We miss the true richness of what David is saying we are offered in the Lord both here and now while living in this broken world and then ultimately realised in heaven as well. Unlike our regular Western formula Hebrew thought often works by building to a main point in the middle and then filling out the idea by working back outward from the peak again.

And that's what I've tried to allude to as a structure for the sermon outline on the back of your bulletin if you're wondering what's going on there. It's the practice that the conclusion is right in the middle seated between two work examples in verse 1 to 3 and then 5 and 6.

The whole psalm emphasises the phrase for you are with me. The dark valley is the self-same right path as the green fields and still waters. The intimate relationship with the Lord transforms how we view even the darkest worldly circumstances.

[15 : 03] We remain on the right path. Our access to green grass and pure water remains secure in our shepherd. shepherd. The entire psalm centers this stunning idea that the greatest strongest the most gentle and generous shepherd is with us.

That was the confidence of David to say that he shall not want. What more could he have than to be with the shepherd himself? This is the confidence of a boy standing before a fully armed Goliath

with nothing but a sling and a few stones.

The crescendo of Psalm 23 that God is with us his chosen people is a biblical theme that's not limited to just this psalm. God was with Adam and Eve in the garden before the fall.

The fall resulted in separation for all of Adam's children. God promises to Abraham to make a people for himself. God promises to be with Moses as he goes before Pharaoh.

God is symbolically with Israel through the ark and the temple. Jesus himself is known as Emmanuel God with us. When Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure he sends the Holy Spirit that he could be within us and with us and Jesus' famous promise is the Great Commission.

[16:23] Behold I am with you always to the end of the age. Indeed at the conclusion of Revelation again it is an image of being with God. Behold the dwelling place of God is with man he will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God.

Revelation chapter 21. Why don't we see this as the answer to life's ills as David does? Why are we so inclined to see God's blessing to us exclusively in material terms?

yet we find it hard to notice the extravagance of his offer to be with us for us to be with him. How would our lives be different if we saw this as clearly as David does?

Now David's confidence in the valley of the death is not an idle fancy. We have seen how it's been built on a foundation of God's past faithfulness but here he expands it to God's present faithfulness. Two images are used to focus on specific aspects of our God's character. Both demonstrate he is more than capable to deliver on his promises. Firstly the rod or the club the weapon of choice for shepherds as they protect their flock.

[17:46] A simple yet effective weapon in the skilled hands of a shepherd it was a capable provider of protection for the flock under his care. The second item is the staff which we might also call a crook.

It's a tool of direction or guidance. God's presence is not hypothetical but he's hands on in correcting his sheep in guiding them. He makes his sheep follow the right paths.

It is not an easy way but it is secured by the father's strength not David's capacity to boldly follow. Seeing God's power knowing his control brings comfort to those who are his sheep.

They trust in his providence not in their own wisdom. When we hit verse 5 we're now done with the shepherd imagery. It has served its purpose. We move on to the very human image of a dinner party a celebration by the host and what a host we see portrayed here.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. The realism of this psalm should be a great comfort to us. This table is set while enemies watch on.

[19:03] There are dark paths as well as green fields. We can see life as we experience it reflected in this reality. Just as Jesus became a man and walked the earth God gets it.

He gets us and he is enough. Nothing is going to stop him hosting this party not the presence of enemies. Note though that this party is not for them.

They can see but do not embrace our God. There is a warning here. Although Psalm 23 is widely embraced by non-Christians the psalm itself does not embrace them.

Indeed at each point the good promises and comfort offered specifically exclude those who are not invited to the party here or do not submit to the Lord as their shepherd earlier.

There will be people here this morning in that camp. Don't allow yourself to be fooled into comfort here. If you are not willing to submit to the shepherd to take Christ as your Lord nor are you invited to the party.

[20:17] There is no hope offered other than the free invitation to join. Jesus' offer still stands come to me all of you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me because I am lowly and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. This is exactly the hope we see affirmed in Psalm 23.

Don't be left looking on alone in the valley of shadow. As the party metaphor continues you anoint my head with oil my cup overflows.

Again this is a new image of bountiful vision. I'm not sure about you though but when I read about anointing the head with oil my mind jumps straight to Samuel anointing David with oil as God's chosen king.

But that's actually not what's going on in this verse. In Hebrew it's a different word for a different purpose. At that time it was customary as host of the day to provide fragrant oil for your guests

when they arrived at your place.

[21 : 23] It's more akin to something like Mary Magdalene when she washed Jesus' feet and then anointed them with perfume. It's an image of abundant extravagant generosity the precious refreshing oil provided.

And the cup is overflowing. It is an image of bounty of generous welcome. Remember the symmetry of the psalm? It opened affirming the centrality of God's past faithfulness to how David views the world.

He does not want. Now as we come down from the crescendo of that intimate relationship in the spotlight we wrap up by looking forward to God's future faithfulness certain and sure.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Here again the old English doesn't speak clearly to my ears.

A more contemporary phrasing of verse 6 is faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life. This is the Lord actively seeking out David's good pursuing him without stopping without ultimate success assured as David's place in the Lord is secured forever.

[22 : 37] It's not based on David's actions or abilities but entirely on the Lord's strength. Just as a sheep is dependent on the shepherd here again is an expression of God's faithful and reliable goodness to David in Christ to us as his people purchased at grace price.

David looks to the security of his relationship with the Lord of the ultimate success assured based only on the Lord's word. Remember David didn't have the plan laid out.

He wasn't aware of the price that would be paid to secure his salvation on the cross. How much more do we have to take confidence in? Paul in Romans 8 echoes David's sentiments in light of the cross.

Neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is our truth. That is why Psalm 23 is such an enduring favourite amongst the faithful. It's a poetic embodiment of the history of the world and what it means for how we should view ourselves in six short succinct verses.

[23 : 56] As his adopted children we are loved by our creator in our weakness and our brokenness. He pursues us and lavishes love upon us.

Augustine said you move us to delight in praising you. You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. We are created for fellowship with God.

The whole point of our existence is indeed to dwell with him. So often we are praying to feel that we can't be present with Jesus because of something we've done, something we've said or thought.

So often we are skewed in our orientation and don't even ask or seek God to fulfil our need for him.

But we chase a myriad of other pleasures, of other interests that inevitably leave us disappointed.

Psalm 23 is a song of praise and rejoicing. But we have a God who pursued us, lavished love upon us and will take us home. Psalm 23 is a song of comfort and hope in hard times because our God is faithful.

[25 : 10] He is with us through it all and will remain with us forever. a true answer to our innermost need and desire. Remember this profound truth that the Lord, your shepherd, is with you.

It order a shape how we view every aspect of life. It reminds us of the truth of God's perspective against the many lies of this world. It liberates us to live our lives on the right path following his ways in confidence.

Not for ourselves but in our shepherd who provides all we need and has secured us that we can be with him forever to the glory of his great name.

Amen. Amen.