

The LORD is my shepherd

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Preacher: Rob Patterson

[0:00] All right, good morning. If you're, it's holiday time, so this is a time when we have lots of regulars away and lots of people visiting. So if you don't know who I am, my name is Rob, I'm one of the pastors here, and I'll be speaking on our holiday series.

So during the year we have our main sort of longer series during the term time, and during the holiday periods we choose to refresh in a passage of scripture that's designed to really lift us and do just that, refresh us.

And so for the next three weeks we'll be delving into Psalm 23, perhaps one of the best known passages of scripture, let alone psalms. Many of us will actually know this psalm well.

We'll have sung it even. Did you know there was actually, it wasn't selected for this morning I don't think, but there is actually a tune to it. Maybe it's too old school now for us to be going there, but we've sung it, we've read it, we've lived with it, being comforted and consoled by it.

And that's great because that's what psalms are meant to do. They're meant to match the struggles of life to truth about God.

[1:10] And that's what I'm hoping that we'll find this morning as we go through Psalm 23, at least the first three verses. And this psalm, despite how well we know it, will always do what it was intended to do in us.

It'll grow us. And the psalm has three main promises that we'll be looking at over the next three weeks, just so you can track the course of where we're going here. There's the restoration for the broken and lost in verses 2 and 3.

Verse 1 is kind of like the heading for the whole psalm. Verses 2 and 3, restoration for the broken and lost. Verse 4, comfort for the fearful and threatened. And then we finish off. Oh, have I missed? Verse 5 and 6. Then blessing for God's chosen people. So today we're going to look at that first one, restoration for the broken and lost. The promise of restoration for the broken and lost.

I'm going to suggest that we need that more desperately than ever. We are a society that is so lost.

[2:16] We barely know who we are in ourselves. We struggle to piece life together on so many levels. And it's ironic because, in a sense, we've never been more free. We're so free to choose.

Any direction, any identity, any lifestyle. No point of reference. Authority figures, well, they're forbidden from speaking into my life. That would be an abuse of their power if they were to do that, to impose their will on me.

My friends, they can't even challenge my point of view because it's gone beyond actually respecting me as a person. Now you actually have to respect my view as well, even if it's stupid. We're afraid to say anything because of fear of causing offense.

Not even my DNA has any voice anymore in terms of who I am. Which way is up? Even the concept of right and wrong is fluid.

It seems that as long as I'm not hurting anyone else, it's fine. I'm fine. I can carry on doing what I'm doing. But what about me? What if I'm hurting? What if I'm hurting me in the path I'm choosing?

[3:30] Where is the solid ground? Well, the solid ground for King David, the author of this psalm, is God.

King David was one of the most powerful men in the region of the ancient Near East at the time that he wrote this psalm. Yet he faced internal and external conflict. And he knew that there was only one person that could guide him through.

Despite all his power, he relied on the Lord as his shepherd. And he opens the psalm with those words. In verse 1, That's a huge statement.

It's full of depth. And let's take it piece by piece. Let's take even the first two words. The Lord, as we have it in English. That is the Lord. The one and only God.

Ruler of everything. Just as we saw in Romans 11.36 a few weeks ago. Well, a few months ago now, sorry. Not a few weeks ago. For from him and through him and to him are all things. [4 : 36] To him be the glory forever and ever. And if we were just to stay in the book of Psalms and look at the last six psalms. Well, they're just all about the praise of God.

In fact, the last psalm finishes with the line, Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. David's point.

There is only one God. So every other God is an imposter. And this one God, says David, deserves your wholehearted devotion.

Everything that you are. Now I say this knowing that some of us here aren't Christians. And that's probably going to sound pretty arrogant to you. In fact, probably going to sound pretty arrogant to some of us who are Christians.

So let's just have a little bit of a talk about this for a moment. Because this is the very starting point of David's psalm. We need to get this right. We struggle with David's claim that there is one God, the Lord.

[5 : 49] This is the only person that can actually make sense of life and everything in it. We struggle with that because it's an absolute. It means that every other option that you can come up with is wrong.

And we don't like that because we've bought into the idea that you respect each other's beliefs, as I said earlier. Now let me just get this straight. David didn't say this because he was an ignorant man born, you know, 3,000 years ago.

So he knew no better. David was actually living in a context where the tolerance that we think we've just come up with was already in existence. There were multiple gods. You could, you know, you could take your choice.

Every family almost seemed to have their own gods. But certainly every community of people, every ethnic group did. David wasn't ignorant of this issue when he wrote the psalm.

It's not a new thing. So David was actually considered offense then. So why did he say it? Well, you could say that he was being faithful to who God claims to be.

[7 : 01] You could say that he said these things because he believed that he was right. And that this decision wasn't just a possible decision amongst many, but this was a life or death decision.

It was that important. Let me try and explain this to you in terms of mine and Joe's life at the moment. Our sister-in-law has been diagnosed with cancer.

She knows the diagnosis. The treatment options are really effective if they begin treatment now. But she's denied them all.

Not because she wants to die, but because she's a Buddhist. And she believes that with the power of positive thinking, she can cleanse herself of this cancer.

She believes that she can heal her own body with the power of her mind. It's a sincere belief.

[8 : 05] But it's not working. She's been given two years to live. So what do I do? What does Joe do?

I respect her. I respect that she has her views. But I'm going to want to tell her what I believe to be the truth.

I tell her that she's wrong and that she's dying and that there is hope. Friends, that's what King David is doing here as he writes this psalm. The king of Israel, during its golden age, knew that nothing else was enough except to turn independence to the one true God.

And this mighty one true God over everything is knowable. We know this because this God is known to David by name.

The word he uses here is Yahweh, the covenant name of God. The personal name that God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. It means I am who I am. I will be who I will be.

[9 : 13] He's the ultimate reference point. It means the God who promised to bless his people. It means the faithful and true one. When all around us is unstable and changing and falling apart, this God is stable.

Rock steady. Faithful. And the metaphor that David uses to try and convey this to us is one that's very familiar to him.

He was a shepherd before he became a king. And so he takes up this term, shepherd. And he says the words, the Lord is my shepherd.

Again, there are two aspects to what David says here. First, he says he's my shepherd. And now a shepherd in David's time was a lifetime calling.

It's all in. The shepherd lived with his flock 24-7. It wasn't like it is now, living in a homestead and the sheep are out there, barbed wire around and so on. He lived with his sheep.

[10:21] He knew his sheep by name. And he is everything to that flock. He is the guide, the protector, the physician. This all-powerful God.

Devoted to his people like a shepherd to his sheep. To live with us.

To be our guide, our protector, our physician. And you see there that it's more than simply him being a shepherd.

But it's that he's my shepherd. We can say that he is my shepherd. Now, Hannah, our daughter, when she was young, she had a love for horses.

She was no good at maths, but a friend of ours who has a farm offered her a field to keep this horse in. But she had to provide all the needs for this horse.

[11:22] And with no ability at maths whatsoever, she managed to come up with a spreadsheet that itemized every bill and expense this horse would have. And it was amazing how much effort and thought she'd put into caring for this horse.

We were so thankful to our friends for offering to house this horse for us that we bought her a rabbit instead. And she loved that rabbit.

She loved it so much. And she bought another one. And unfortunately, that rabbit turned out to be pregnant when we bought it. And so we ended up having nine rabbits. And she knew each one of them by name.

Their personalities. Their special needs. She loved them and cherished them. And that was just a childlike love.

Just a childlike love in comparison to this. You see, when David calls the Lord his shepherd, he really means that he belongs to God.

[12:28] We like to put ourselves in the position of the shepherd type role. But what he's saying here is, no, no, we're not the ones in control. We're the ones submitting to the one who is in control and who loves us dearly.

David is saying he belongs to this shepherd. And that this shepherd looks upon him with love and calls him mine.

And calls me mine. And calls me mine. Pledges to protect me with his life. Imagine the indescribable power of the one true God.

The mature commitment of that faithful God. How much more does it mean that this God will shepherd us?

David goes on to explain just how much by saying, the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

[13:33] The second half of verse 1. I shall not want. Sounds like a blank check, doesn't it? Better than a genie in a bottle.

You'd think, well, if that's the case and the people who God is shepherding with all that power and that desire to care for his people, the people that he's shepherding should be easy to spot.

Perhaps they're the happily married ones, the ones with 1.9 children. The house with more rooms than children, which seems to be more and more of the case.

Nice car, more of them than children as well. Steady job earning at least \$85,000. And that's just the average for Australia. Surely God's sheep are going to be achieving more than that.

But is that what David's talking about here? It's important to remember that this verse 1 is actually the heading for the psalm. It's the main point. So to get to the meaning of the main point, we actually need to read how David actually explains that point in the rest of the psalm.

[14:39] And that's where we start to get into verses 2 and 3 of it. We need this rest of the psalm to understand the breadth of who David is declaring God to be to us. And so as we read into the psalmist, we get to this point where we discover that he gives us rest.

See, first David actually speaks from within that shepherding metaphor. And he says in verse 2, he makes me lie down in green pastures and he leads me beside still waters. Gareth read that better than I just did, but he's Welsh and, you know, Welsh and sheep.

They have a close relationship, so he probably gets that better than I do. But what it is, is it's a poetic expression of God's care for us as his sheep, isn't it? It's a poetic way of saying that the Lord guides me and provides for me.

And yet digging a little deeper, we can see how David drew on his knowledge of God's faithful provision. You see, the phrase still waters could be translated waters of rest. It's the word used to describe where the people of the Exodus, as they were wandering through the wilderness, stopped to rest as the Lord led them. You remember the Lord led them as a cloud of smoke during the day and flame during the night.

[16:00] Ezekiel actually picks up this imagery that David is using here. He picks it up in Ezekiel 34 to actually project it into the future, to prophesy the future of an exiled Israel. So this word rest actually promises more than holiday, more than the holiday period that we're in now.

It's more than an absence of movement. It's the assurance of our shepherd's presence. It's the promise of safety, security, rescue.

And even as we start to break these things open, I need to just explain a little bit more to you here as well, that sometimes Hebrew poetry actually uses repetition to explain a point.

And that's what we see here in verse 2. One line and then the next line say almost the same thing. They kind of fill out the same theme. What we also have here, though, is verse 2 and verse 3 explaining the same thing.

They're not different points. They're actually the same points. Verse 3 is an explanation of verse 2. And David's explanation is this. What does it mean to actually be, you know, in lovely, nice green fields or beside quiet waters?

[17:13] It means this. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Let's just start at the beginning of that. He restores my soul. This is a phrase that I've been rolling around in my head for the last few weeks. What does it mean to have my soul restored?

Well, to restore, if I was actually to look at a translation, the possible meanings that it could mean in the Hebrew, to restore means to bring back what was lost. Can you think of a shepherding story in the Bible where that lostness was applied to shepherding?

To turn back from a wrong path. Or repent. Have you heard that word used in the Bible at all?

Can you recall that? Or it can mean to return to a previous and better state. Almost like a recreation.

[18:24] Have you heard that promise come up in God's word before? Your house. Your car. Your job. Your super plan.

Your children's success. These things may be sources of comfort and joy and security for you. But these are not the shepherd's primary concern in these verses.

He is concerned for our souls. Our very selves. Our very selves. And again, the second line explains the first.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. We read here, paths of righteousness.

If we're wanting to understand what restoration of soul looks like, then right up front, David wants us to understand that it involves walking the path of righteousness. The rescue.

[19:25] The finding the lost. The turning back from a wrong path. The internal healing here is specific. These are all referring to a return to living under God's rule.

Living the way we were created for. Straightening out what has been bent. To live like God in the world. To declare his glory through how we live.

And man, in this society, in this age, we see the rules and moral codes as things that steal our freedom. That limit our self-expression. And so we rebel against them. I read this week that the Indonesian students are demonstrating against a new law that restricts their sexual freedom.

Sex outside of marriage. They're rebelling against that. Ironically, they want to restrict the freedom of the governing officials because of the corruption that exists in the government.

So there's this thing playing off here. We want our freedom, but hey, don't you have it in this area? Let me just say, I have seen nothing good and I have experienced nothing good from pursuing sexual freedom.

[20:34] Moments of pleasure weighed against years of regret. Unfettered freedom does not enrich life.

We know there's right and wrong. We see it written on the pained faces of the people who encounter us when we do them wrong.

We feel it in our own hearts as we experience the same from others. Wrong hurts us deeply. Right enriches us all.

And God is the shepherd who knows the difference. And he knows us. And he knows the right path for us to be walking.

The one that we struggle to find alone. We struggle to find that path because of the next verse. Next part of the verse.

[21 : 31] For his name's sake. For his name's sake. We spend our time trying to run our own lives our own way.

Messed up, crazy, stupid lives. Glimpses of meaning and purpose for sure. But glimpses, well, with no guarantees. Everyone doing what they choose.

Now we've made that into a virtue. And what is it doing for us? And here in one little phrase, David undoes us. He reveals the truth that it's not about me.

It doesn't work when it's all about me. Everyone trying to be kind to one another even. But each ultimately still all about themselves. My freedom is always at the expense of someone else.

But my life was never meant to be about me. It was meant to be lived for God. We were meant to be a community of people living for God.

[22 : 35] All pointing in the same direction. All pulling in that same direction. All serving one another joyfully and faithfully for his glory.

Like he serves us. Do you see how this comes out in the structure of the psalm? Have a think about which word comes first in these verses.

The Lord. He guides. He leads. He restores. He leads. He looks into our lives.

And he sees our lostness. He sees where we are straying off the path. He sees where we are broken. He sees all of these things. And he seeks and finds us. He guides us back onto the right path.

He heals us where we're broken. And friends, this isn't an overnight transformation. Well, it's not for me. Maybe it is for you. But it's a whole of life experience. A journey toward righteousness.

[23 : 45] A steady correction of our course toward living for him. And it's always both. Being a better person without God being our goal is nothing.

Being wholeheartedly for God. And not living in any way different. Is nothing. It's always both.

A journey toward righteousness. With a steady correction of course toward living for him. For his name's sake. And friends, we don't often see this until we look back in our lives.

I don't know if you've found this. Often it's the experience of our shepherd with us through lifelong struggles. Often it feels like at times the struggle is going nowhere.

But regardless of how it feels. What David is saying is. The Lord is our shepherd.

[24 : 54] And still there's more depth to this. You see, even as I say those words. The Lord is our shepherd.

We're going to consider the man who was saying these things. David. King over God's covenant people. King during what was called Israel's golden age. And yet he needed his shepherd. He wasn't responsible for delivering the promises of his son.

He knew this was above his pay grade. He was the recipient of the promises of his son. He was a great man.

But he knew when he was out of his depth. And life in its entirety was something that was out of his depth to control. Only one person has managed to fulfill that role.

And it won't be you. Marty shared with the kids earlier. The truth of this. You take that role on yourself.

[25 : 58] And it will crush you. It's not me as your pastor. I'm way out of my depth to actually kind of make these truths real for you in your life. In fact, expecting these things of me or anyone else in this room.

Will just disillusion you with me and each other. And God's church. Our job is to point each other toward the true shepherd.

Jesus Christ. The one who did lay down his life for his sheep. The one who lived the life that we should have lived.

And died the death we should have died. As Tim Keller puts it so well. The shepherd who knows us personally. When he called our name.

Do you remember that moment? When he called your name. When we heard his sweet voice.

[27 : 06] And as our shepherd. He lives with us. We abide in him. We are in him. So even as I read this psalm.

Three thousand years later. There's a depth to it. That David longed for in a sense. Knew in part. But we now know. And we as Christians can say.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. If you're a Christian. He's your shepherd too.

Let me finish with these words of encouragement. Because it's not just when you feel. His shepherding ways. That he's your shepherd. But always. Always.

The Lord is your shepherd. The Lord is your shepherd. The Lord is your shepherd. As I finish now. I'm going to close in prayer. But what I would like to say.

[28 : 09] Is after the service. And after the next three services. That we go through Psalm 23. Joe and I are going to be available for prayer. Just down the front here. After the service. If you're finding that.

That you're struggling through life. And you need. God's shepherding intervention in your life.

You're not feeling that. Or you're just weighed down.

And you just need someone to walk alongside you. As the truth of this psalm unfolds in your life.

Then come down to the front after the service. And we'll be around for about 15 minutes. And we'll pray with you. This is a psalm that was meant to be sung.

Sometimes we need to speak it to each other. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord you are our shepherd.

And we know that we shall not want. You make us lie down in green pastures. And lead us beside still waters. You restore our souls. You lead us in paths of righteousness.

[29 : 15] For your name's sake. Sometimes kicking and screaming. But gradually Lord. Grow us. Growing us in willingness.

And desire to follow you wholeheartedly. And we thank you for this. Lord we pray. That the truth of this psalm. As it unfolds over the coming three weeks.

Would be a truth that we carry with us. Through all of life. Knowing that you truly are. Our shepherd. Amen.