

Finding true peace

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[0 : 00] Psalm 23. 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. Now is there anyone here who's done mindfulness training? They had to do a course at work or school or something like that?

Stick your hands up. Yeah, an increasing number of people are doing this kind of training. I've never done it, so I've got the reckless enthusiasm of a non-conversant here.

But if I've understood it correctly, it's all about paying attention to the present moment. Is that right? Have I got it right? Thank you very much for a trained counsellor there. But the problem is, it's quite hard to do that.

[1 : 23] I mean, I've tried a little bit. It's really hard to block out thoughts about the future. It's quite unnatural, isn't it? Just, some people don't like doing this.

Close your eyes for a moment and I'll try and help you, just to concentrate on the present. Right, just think about the now. Just block out those thoughts about your journey to work or school on Monday.

Just try not to think about that. Keep your eyes closed. Stop thinking about that next appraisal. The boss's new target. That colleague or guy at school who's got it in for you.

Look, just make sure you don't think about those health problems that won't go away. The children, those grandchildren. Just don't think Brexit, okay? British values, the economy.

Just don't think about that. Well, I don't need to carry on, do I? You can open your eyes again now. Well, true peace is not found in emptying our minds of the future, is it? As Christians, it's in thinking about the future, mindful of the right things.

[2 : 28] That the Lord is our shepherd. Now, at the time that David wrote this psalm, it was very natural for the people of God to see the Lord as their shepherd.

As Psalm 78, 52 says, He brought his people out like a flock. He led them like a sheep through the wilderness. And here is shepherd King David putting that truth in the most personal terms.

Not the Lord is our shepherd, which is true. The Lord is my shepherd. And think about David's life, being on the run from Saul, hiding in caves, battling Goliath.

And there he is, doing a kind of Christian mindfulness, thinking about not just the present, but especially the future. Knowing that the Lord is his shepherd.

Knowing that all that Jesus has done and fulfilled in this psalm, that he is the good shepherd.

[3 : 37] That he has laid his life down for us. He knows each one of us by name. So what we're going to do in this session is practice some Christian mindfulness.

Mindfulness about the future to give us peace in the present. So we're going to see three things. The Lord my shepherd will provide for every need.

The Lord my shepherd will be present in every trial. And the Lord my shepherd will pursue me with goodness and love. And each of these things I want us to kind of lock our minds on and let these truths sink down from our heads to our hearts and just be refreshed by them as we dwell upon them.

We're going to have a time in small groups after this. And we're going to just have time just to enjoy this wonderful psalm together. So here's the first thing we can be mindful of.

The Lord my shepherd will provide for every need. Now it's great just on the walk this afternoon to walk past Wingham Wildlife Park. We've got an annual ticket as a family.

[4 : 45] And it's a great place to go to. All kinds of crazy animals there. And some very scary lions. Now if you are an animal, what animal would you like to be?

Well in our family it's usually a dog. Because we've got a dog. And her life seems to be pretty good. She just eats, sleeps and plays. A lion. A monkey.

A bird. Not once has it been a sheep. And there's good reason for that, isn't there? Sheeps. Sheeps. I can't even say it. Sheep are famous for lacking common sense, aren't they?

Now we've all seen those crazy situations in the countryside where there's lovely green pasture in a field. And where's the dumb sheep? The other side of the fence. In danger on the road.

Sheep. Sheep are not designed in a way that shows great common sense in the way that they use it. I mean, you know, sheep need to drink in the right way to survive, don't they?

[5 : 47] If they go near a river that flows too fast, they either drown in it or they go thirsty. Their mouths can't cope with anything apart from still waters. Because they've just got to get down and drink it in the right way.

Well, the Lord knows what we're really like. We might want to strut around and put on a brave face and pretend that we're a spiritual lion or tiger.

But the Lord knows us better than we know ourselves and he calls us sheep. He knows that we're not sorted. He knows that we easily go astray.

And how refreshing that is for the Lord to describe us in this way. Because if we're really honest and give ourselves time to think about it, we start this year together as a church and so many things are crowding in on our minds already, aren't they?

About what's going on this coming week. We're not sure how we'll step up to the mark this coming year. How we'll keep going as Christians. Will I mess up yet again?

[6 : 58] Will I fall flat on my face? But the wonderful Christian mindfulness of this psalm is that the Lord will provide for my every need.

He'll be there giving me all I need to keep me going this year. Food, water, satisfaction, direction. And my shepherd doesn't kick me from behind.

He leads me from the front to good pasture. To quiet waters. To the right paths. He promises to provide for our every need.

And I hope you notice the subject of all these opening verbs. I'll make it obvious. 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 name's sake.

[8 : 05] Because he's doing all these things. We can't muck it up. He calls us sheep, which isn't particularly flattering, but it's comforting when we let it sink in.

And he is the shepherd leading from the front, promising to give us all that we need. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Now I think with these wonderful images we're to avoid a purely material application.

We shouldn't apply it to mean that the green pasture is the best food. That the still waters means that we'll get the nicest drink and we'll get deliveries from Laithwaites all this year.

We'll have every satisfaction laid before us. It's obvious that Christians fleeing persecution in Myanmar or Eritrea or North Korea would rightly protest at that interpretation.

It must mean here that the Lord will give us everything we need to keep following him. 2 Peter 1, verse 3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

[9 : 14] He really does and really will give us everything that we need to keep following him this year. But it takes mindfulness to get to that point of peace and joy.

Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission, really felt the pressure of leading a mission that was by faith. And apparently in every house he lived he had two words on the mantelpiece.

Ebenezer and Jehovah Jireh. Ebenezer meaning hitherto up till now the Lord has helped us. Looking in the past.

Jehovah Jireh looking to the future. The Lord will provide. And we've had at the start of our church we had an OMF couple who kept repeating these words.

Ebenezer and Jehovah Jireh. And what a help it was for us just to discipline ourselves and look back and think the Lord helped us at that moment.

[10 : 16] These Ebenezer moments are kind of stacked up and we should be making those stones of remembrance, so to speak. To see how the Lord has provided. We easily forget, don't we?

But how we need to be looking to the forward forward to Jehovah Jireh. And that is what David is doing in this psalm. He is looking forward in total expectation and confidence that the Lord would provide for his every need.

Well, what are those Ebenezer moments for you already? That you can look back on and tell stories about to your friends, to your children and to your grandchildren.

We need to keep these stories going to prove the faithfulness of God in our experience. But we also need to trust that the Lord will provide for everything that we need.

He is our shepherd. We're sheep who'll go astray. But we shall not want anything. Because the Lord's fingerprints are all over our lives if we just stop for a moment and see.

[11 : 23] Those moments of panic come in when we don't allow these thoughts to drip into our hearts. We worry about that child going off to school or university and we forget that there is a really wonderful shepherd who is going ahead of them in that situation.

We worry about that future situation and we're just not sure if we're going to survive in that workplace or in that new situation in life.

We need to be saying to ourselves, the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. So let the peace of God enter your heart as you see that Jehovah will jire, to put it in plain terms.

The Lord will provide. You shall not want. These wonderful images. Green pasture, still waters. He restores my soul. So often we look forward to that holiday of a lifetime and everything's going to be sorted then.

And we find that it rains and it's a terrible time and everyone falls out with each other and you never get there anyway and you lose your baggage. But then you come home and then you have three wonderful nights of sleep and it's just the best time of rest that you've had.

[12 : 48] And you think, yeah, it's happened too often to me. So my expectations of holidays are now fairly low. But my expectation of the Lord, my shepherd, has only increased thinking, well, he's the one who's leading me.

He is the one who's leading me beside quiet waters and restoring my soul here and there. Yes, I can be responsible and use the means of grace and I should.

But I need to do that conscious that the Lord is my shepherd and he is leading me and will take care of all these things to such an extent that I can have real peace. Even as I think about the future.

So the Lord, my shepherd, will provide for my every need. Secondly, the Lord, my shepherd, will be present in every trial. And we move on to verse four.

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.

[13 : 57] Just think in your minds for a moment. What is the worst evil that strikes you with fear? Is it being the victim of a terrorist attack?

Is it losing your job? Is it getting that horrendous diagnosis from the doctor? Is it getting mugged or raped or whatever else it is?

Well, the Lord doesn't remove us from every evil. It's not like there's a force field around us and we'll be immune from every evil and every trial in this world. Christians face evil and enemies just like everyone else.

But this is the best thing. The Lord, my shepherd, is present with me in every trial. And the image in verse five is just wonderful, isn't it?

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Now, what would we expect to do in the presence of enemies?

[15 : 14] Panic? Phone a friend? Run away? Fight? Well, none of those things are mentioned here in verse five. If anything, it would be sit.

Have fellowship with the Lord. Even in the presence of enemies. Imagine a kind of Lord of the Rings scale battlefield.

And right in the middle of this huge battlefield is a table for two. And the host is the Lord himself. Tablecloth laid out.

Wine. Food. And the host doing the things that a typical Eastern host would do. As a mark of love and respect. As a mark of love and respect. Pouring fragrant oil on your head as the guest.

Overfilling your cup with wine to show that while in the presence of this host, you will have more than everything that you need. In the presence of evil, every trial, the Lord himself is with us and we can enjoy sweet fellowship with him.

[16 : 24] So, as we think about horrendous future situations that might plague us with fear, we can have peace knowing that the Lord himself is with us.

There was a missionary working in a refugee camp in Burundi. And they came across a man in his 80s who'd walked for days to get there. He'd seen his wife and his children hacked to death in front of him.

His house had been burned down and all that was left was the ragged shirt on his back. And as he finished telling this story of horrific loss, he said to this missionary who was just astounded, I never knew that Jesus was all I needed until Jesus was all I had.

I never knew that Jesus was all I needed until Jesus was all I had. Those trials that plague us with fear and get us to kind of wake up in a sweat at night are not the trials we think they are.

Because Jesus, our shepherd, is with us. In every trial. And how wonderful it is to have Christian biographies and Christian testimonies of people who say that this really is true.

[17 : 46] In the most horrendous situations, the tangible presence of the Lord in those trials is extraordinary. Now, the Lord doesn't draw near to us in such a way every day, but he does when we really, really need him.

So we can't just think, well, I don't quite have that experience. But he will give us that experience of his presence when we most need him. And he promises to do so.

Provision, presence.

And lastly, pursuit. My shepherd will pursue me with goodness and love right up to heaven itself. Verse 6.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. That verb, to follow, can be translated pursue or persecute.

[18 : 56] Now, when I was at theological college, I really wanted to learn languages, but I just really struggled with Hebrew. So a group of us used to bunk off on a Friday afternoon and do street evangelism in Southgate instead.

But there was one thing that, well, two bits of Hebrew I remembered. One is that the Hebrew word for tense is ohel, which I've remembered every time I've gone camping with my family. But the second thing is that this verb, radaf, to follow, can be translated pursue or persecute.

Okay? So surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me or persecute me all the days of my life. And what a contrast.

In the presence of my enemies who might persecute me, as a Christian, my persecutor is the Lord persecuting me with goodness and mercy all the days of my life.

So the Lord doesn't just, you know, allow us to kind of carry on as we are and then he tries to kind of catch up with a bit of goodness and mercy if he can keep up with us. It's a much more active and dynamic thing here.

[20 : 10] He is pursuing us every day with goodness and mercy. If only we would trust that that is true. If only we would catch a glimpse and see it for ourselves.

When it talks about mercy here or steadfast love, it's his covenant love. It's the love that he's promised to show us.

He's made a deal that this is love that he will pour out upon us because Christ's blood has been shed for us. We're in his family and he's just going to keep going this way every day of our lives.

So there's no day in our lives that those two taps of goodness and love don't stay open and gush out into our lives. Some have called them sheepdogs. They don't stop kind of hounding us until we get to be with the Lord in heaven.

Two men were hiking in Wales. They came across a boy in the mountains keeping his sheep. The travelers talked with him about shepherding and the conversation went to Psalm 23.

[21 : 16] One man told the boy, think of the five fingers of your left hand. Have a go yourself if you want. One of the men told the boy, you can meditate on Psalm 23 verse 1 like this.

The man grabbed his thumb and said that stands for the. The index finger was Lord and they talked about who the Lord was. The middle finger stood for is, present tense right now.

The fourth finger was my and the little finger was shepherd. The following year the men returned on another hiking trip and this time they stopped at a small wayfaring house for a cup of tea.

On the table was the picture of that very boy they'd met a year before. Yes, said the woman, that was my son. He died last winter in a storm. He fell down a cliff and lay there a long time.

Only later did we find him. But there was something strange. We've never understood it. When he was found, his right hand was grasping the fourth finger of his left hand.

[22 : 22] The Lord is my shepherd. This is true for every one of us who are believers in this barn.

How awesome that the living God who spoke this world into existence can be spoken of as my shepherd. That the Lord Jesus Christ is my shepherd.

And we need to give ourselves time to practice Christian mindfulness. That my shepherd will provide for every need in the future.

Everything I need to keep going in following him. That my shepherd will be present in every trial. And that my shepherd will pursue me with goodness and love right up to the day I go to be with him in heaven.

So what we need to do is just kind of learn to talk to one another and remind each other that this is true. So when some sad or bad or difficult thing or an evil or there are enemies, we can kind of learn to talk to each other in a way that just reminds each other that this is true.

[23 : 44] Sometimes it's good to quote a Bible verse, isn't it? But sometimes it's good to say something a bit more gentle like we're in good hands, aren't we?

And then we're connecting at the level of what we know as the people of God. That we're in good hands. The Lord is my shepherd and yours. And nothing more needs to be said.

But what we're going to do now is get into groups of, I don't know, two, three, four, whatever's comfortable in the seating arrangement and just go through some of these questions at the bottom.

What worries about future needs rob you of peace right now? And then how does this psalm give you peace? And then what worries about future trials are robbing you of peace right now?

And how does this psalm give you peace? And then the last question, how can we help each other face the future well? I've just got on the back some hymns.

[24 : 49] I was just kind of struggling. I do most days, but this was in a special time of struggle a few years ago. And then there's a lovely elderly man in our church who sent me something that I've printed off and kept in my wallet ever since.

And it's these hymns and a few other bits and pieces. And I took a day out and I just meditated upon these hymns, which are other people's meditations upon the truths we've been thinking about.

And the other one.

And the other one.

Oh, how great thy loving kindness, vaster, broader than the sea. Oh, how marvelous thy goodness lavished all on me. Yes, I rest in thee, beloved.

[25 : 59] Know what wealth of grace is thine. Know thy certainty of promise and have made it mine.