

Lacking Nothing

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[0 : 00] Be seated everyone. If I haven't met you before, if you're new this morning, my name's Jonathan, one of the pastors here at the church. And you're joining us at the third week of a five-week series on the Psalms.

You'll remember if you've been here that the first week, two weeks ago, I spoke to you from Psalm 4 about Christian confidence in troubling times. And last week we looked at Psalm 19 and we meditated on God's double self-revelation in his word and in creation from Psalm 19.

And then now this morning we're going to look at Psalm 23. I'm sure you've all heard it before. I think it's probably the John 3.16 of the Old Testament, right? Most of us know it, even if we haven't been in church for most of our lives.

Most of us have heard it before. Every funeral I've done, people have requested either that hymn, Psalm 23, or the Psalm itself as a reading. And I think it's really important for us, even if we know the Psalm really well, to pay attention this morning to the words of the scriptures in this Psalm. And my plan is that we would be encouraged to see God as our shepherd. I've been so convicted this week, looking at this Psalm, about the fact that I so often neglect to see God as being close and intimate and personal and loving.

[1 : 32] And if you're like me and you like theology and speculating about God and so on, you might be given to the tendency that I see in myself to start viewing God as an impersonal kind of mechanical process rather than a personal shepherd who guides us and leads us and keeps us close as the sheep of his pasture.

So I've been convicted this morning, looking at this Psalm, about my need to reconnect with God as close, merciful, good, personal saviour and shepherd. And I hope that's what we see this morning. I'm going to talk this morning about God as shepherd in terms of his provision and purpose, his protection and providence, and his promise and propitiation.

That's six Ps. I was expecting an applause. That's okay. Don't tell Paul.

That took me a while, okay? Seriously though, I want to look at those six things that I see in this Psalm that I think we really need to engage with if we're going to see God, who he truly is this morning.

[2 : 51] So I want to pray for us that he'd help us to do that, and then we'll get into the Psalm. Dear Father, please lead us through this word of yours, just as you lead us through the paths of our lives. Lord, please reveal yourself to us in a very powerful way as personal, loving, benevolent, merciful shepherd.

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Can everyone hear me up the back there? Yep, I'm loud enough. Okay. As I said, this week I've been really convicted about seeing God as being personal, loving, benevolent shepherd.

And I did a bit of research on shepherds just to get to the heart of what I think the Psalmist is going on about here. And I looked at the shepherds of this day and age, the Bedouin shepherds of the area around Jerusalem and Israel.

And I learned some pretty interesting facts about them, actually. A couple of things. A couple of things. The shepherds would know their sheep so well, so very intimately that if they were in the fields, in the pasture by night, asleep, the shepherd himself could walk into the middle of the fold, the middle of the flock, and not a sheep would stir.

And this is true today. And yet if a stranger walks into that same flock sleeping, they'll be up in an instant. They know their shepherd that intimately to know his footsteps and his voice in that way.

[4 : 27] I also learned that these Bedouin shepherds will come down, because water is scarce, they'll come down to these shared water holes. And all the sheep will get mixed up, hundreds of

sheep mixed. Can't tell them apart by sight.

And yet when the shepherd leaves, it's time for them to leave the water hole, he'll simply call his sheep by name and his sheep and no one else's will follow him. So they need never worry about the sheep getting mixed up.

They know their shepherd that intimately. And so I think that's what we need to know that when we look at this psalm. The shepherd, in our experience, shepherds, farmers can be quite gruff, quite impersonal perhaps.

But we need to see in this context that shepherds know their sheep intimately well, and the sheep know their shepherds likewise. This is, you'll notice, an intensely personal psalm.

Notice the language that the psalmist uses. He never says we or us or they, but instead he constantly refers to my and me and I and he and you.

[5 : 33] It's a personal psalm. We're kind of an overflow of the psalmist's personal experience of God as shepherd. So let's take a look at the psalm itself. We'll start with verse 1 to 3a, and we're going to look at the provision and purpose of God our shepherd.

The psalm says, The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He leads me. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. I used to read that and read the I shall not want part and wonder why that was there.

Does that mean that we shouldn't want things in life? But obviously, as you know, what he means is by I shall not want is that I shall not lack anything. Because God is our shepherd, we should not lack anything.

And we do not lack anything. I wonder if you believe that to be true. That because if you are a Christian, because you're a sheep of God's pasture, that necessarily means that you don't lack anything.

[6 : 45] Now, the truth is that we do lack things. I mean, that's obvious. I lack a Ferrari, for instance, at this stage. Working on getting a raise. But at this stage, I lack a Ferrari.

But the point is, of course, we lack things that we want. But we don't lack anything that we need, the Testament of the Bible says.

And I wonder if you believe that. When I asked the 8am service this morning, I said, do you believe that, that you don't lack anything? And almost as one, they started nodding and saying, yes, we believe that.

We believe that. And perhaps it's because some of the older people have been through more adversity that they truly believe that. The Lord is my shepherd.

I shall not lack anything. Listen to Psalm 84, 11. No good. No good does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly.

[7 : 43] We know as Christians who have been given the righteousness of Christ, that by his merit, we walk uprightly. And therefore, we can say, no good does God withhold us who have Christ's righteousness.

So what about Paul in Philippians 4, 19? My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. The Lord is my shepherd.

Therefore, I lack nothing. That's God's provision to us. What about the purpose? What's the purpose of the shepherd in leading us besides still waters, in making us lie down in green pastures? What's his purpose? Verse 3b, he leads me in the right paths for his namesake. He doesn't mainly do it for our happiness or he doesn't mainly do it for our provision.

He mainly does it for his namesake. And this is a huge truth, one of the central truths of Christianity that we need to get right. And it's not something you're going to hear from the man-centred, self-centred world.

[8 : 50] That is that God does everything primarily for his namesake. God does everything primarily so that he will be worshipped, so that he will get glory.

The reason God saved Israel out of Egypt was so that they would worship him in the promised land. The reason that God sent Jesus to earth was to grant you salvation, if you put your trust in him. But primarily, it was so that he would get glory. And similarly, he leads us in right paths for his namesake, so that we will see him as our good shepherd this morning and respond with praise and adoration and commitment and discipleship.

I think one of the reasons we, people like me, sinful, lazy people, tend to see God as a cold, mechanical, distant force is because that way we can neglect our discipleship. That way we can neglect our devotion to him. That way we don't need to become vulnerable to him and share our whole lives with him because he's not interested in us. But when we see God as shepherd, it demands from us discipleship, devotion and praise.

[10:13] And that's why he does it, for his namesake. God does everything, everything, primarily for his namesake. And that's the way we want it. That's the way we should want it.

Let's look at the second point. We're going to look at the protection and providence of the shepherd. We've seen that the shepherd provides, that he has a purpose.

Let's look at protection and providence. Verse 4. I fear no evil.

For you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Psalm 23.

Psalm 23. Psalm 23. Psalm 23. Psalm 23. Psalm 23. And I remember I used to get up during the night, having had a nightmare, or after wetting the bed again, and feeling distressed. And I used to run up the stairs and jump into bed with my parents.

[11:30] And I would look at that plaque in the early morning light. And I would see your rod and your staff, they comfort me. And they had taught me well to know what that meant. That it meant because we have a good shepherd, because God is personal, because he is with us, even in the dark times, because he's mighty to save and protect, his rod and his staff can comfort us.

That we can be comforted in times of stress and despair, because God is mighty and powerful, a good shepherd who protects us. That's the kind of peace that we should have, knowing God as shepherd.

Even in troubling times, even in financially stressing times, simply God is our shepherd. We lack nothing.

His rod and his staff comfort us. As I was looking at this a little more deeply this week, I noticed something I hadn't noticed before.

And that was a change in the psalmist language from verse 1 to 3, where he talks about the shepherd in terms of he. He makes me lie down. He leads me beside waters.

[12:48] He leads me in paths. And when it comes to the time where he starts talking about suffering and dark valleys, he switches to a more personal you.

You are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. And I think this reflects the universal experience of Christians. That when we come to dark valleys, that is, when we come to suffering, when we come to times of trial, that's when God becomes all the more personal to us.

See, the danger with green pastures and sunny skies is that we can start focusing on the grass more than on the shepherd. Is that true? The danger with good times that we experience so often in Australia is that we start to neglect our shepherd.

We stop looking to him so frequently because times are good. What's the need? In the green pastures, we tend to talk about God.

And in the dark valleys, we tend to cry out to God. And that's the universal experience of Christians. And so I think that's what he's trying to get across here, even secondarily, is that even though he walks through the valley of the shadow of death, it's then that he clings all the more tightly to the need of his good shepherd.

[14:11] Which leads us to the next point. I don't want to dwell on that point a little longer, but I want to speak about it in terms of providence, the providence of God.

See, the truth is, the truth of the Bible across the board is that God not only uses, but sends us times of affliction, leads us into dark valleys so that our faith will be made strong, so that we will call out to him and depend on him.

Remember 1 Peter? 1 Peter says, The connection is clear.

It's easy for us, I think, to think that God is leading us in the right paths. God is leading us by the still waters. God is leading us in the green pastures.

But then somehow the shepherd abandons us and we stray off into dark valleys. That's not the case in this psalm. Notice the connection between 3 and 4. Listen to this.

[15:36] Verse 3, God hasn't stopped guiding us when we come to times of trial and suffering and darkness.

Rather, God leads us there for a purpose and it's a good purpose. Remember last week, I talked about Charles Spurgeon. I talked about his almost crippling depression.

And I said how even in the midst of that depression, he found relief in God's creation. Well, he says some really important things for us to hear this morning about God being a shepherd who leads us even into times of darkness for our good.

Listen to some of these quotes. They just turn the world upside down. But they're biblical and good and true. He says, speaking of his suffering, It would be a very sharp and trying experience to me to think that I have an affliction which God never sent me.

That the bitter cup was never filled by his hand. That my trials were never measured out by him. Nor sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity.

[17:02] He says, our afflictions are the health regimen of God. Of an infinitely wise physician and shepherd.

He said to his students, I dare say the greatest earthly blessing that God can give to any of us is health. With the exception of sickness.

If some men that I know could only be favoured with a month of rheumatism, it would, by God's grace, mellow them marvellously.

And he meant that for himself. He dreaded suffering. He wanted to avoid it. And that's, I want to maintain that we should pray for healing when people are sick.

Jesus healed the sick. James encourages us to pray for the healing. But we should see God's hand in every event, whether it's light or dark, whether it's health or sickness.

[18:04] He went on to say, I'm afraid, and this is the point I think, I'm afraid that all the grace that I've got of my comfortable and easy times and happy hours might almost lie on a penny.

But the good that I've received from my sorrows and pains and griefs is altogether incalculable. Affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house.

It is the best book in a minister's library. He recognised the truth that the good shepherd doesn't just lead us into paths, doesn't just lead us into green pastures, but also into the dark valleys.

But there's a purpose in it. It's for our good. Romans 8.28 I've said it every week. What is it? God works all things for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

Do you believe it? Amen. That's the providence of God in our suffering. Let's look at the final point I've got here.

[19:25] The promise and propitiation of the shepherd. 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 my whole life long.

It's a great verse, but I think it's a weak translation. I think it should say, Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Forever. That would have been a startling thing for the original readers to hear. To dwell in the house of the Lord. It was the great high priest's privilege to go into the inner sanctuary of the temple once a year if it was their go.

They might get one shot at a lifetime. That was a very sacred thing. But the psalmist here is looking forward, I think, to the coming of the Messiah.

And he sees the promise of God that those who trust in him will dwell in his house, will dwell in heaven with him forever. That's the promise of our shepherd.

[20:36] And it's all the more strong for us who can look back with the benefit of history and see the cross. See that God made the promise that we would dwell in his house forever and he also made the propitiation.

He made the sacrifice. See, Jesus calls himself in John 10 the good shepherd, doesn't he? He personifies the shepherd in Psalm 23. He is the good shepherd and he's the good shepherd who became the Lamb of God who is slain for the sins of the world.

Listen to him in John 10. Let's just remind one another of what he says. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep. For this reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.

No one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and I have the power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.

[21:50] Jesus is the good shepherd. He was the fulfillment of the promise given to us in Psalm 23 and he was the propitiation.

That's the old word for the sacrifice that was needed to save us from our sins, to save us from death, to save us from hell, to save us from Satan, to save us from ourselves.

I want us every time we hear Psalm 23 to think Jesus is the good shepherd.

So I hope we've seen this morning that our God is not a distant, cold, mechanical force. He's a close, personal, intimate shepherd.

That he knows each of his sheep by name and that in response to that we should give him our wholehearted devotion.

[23 : 02] That we should follow him in every path that he guides us through. We've seen his provision and purpose that we lack nothing that we need.

We lack nothing that is good for us because we have a shepherd who provides. We've seen that his purpose in all of this is that we would glorify him and praise him for who he is.

We've also seen that he's a shepherd who protects us. His rod and his staff comfort us because we know he's mighty to save us.

That even though Satan might be a lion who prowls around, the good shepherd's staff and rod protect us. We've also seen his providence that he leads us not just to quiet waters but also through shadowy valleys.

But it's all for our good. He never stops leading us. He never abandons us. We've also seen that he's a shepherd who makes promises.

[24 : 14] He's promised that we will dwell in his house forever. Why? Because he's the shepherd who made the great propitiation, the great sacrifice for our sins. He's the shepherd who laid down his life for us as sheep.

Be drawn near to God this morning as you hear these words. Be drawn near to God this week as you encounter green pastures and quiet waters and as you encounter dark, shadowy valleys.

This week and for the rest of our lives, let's devote ourselves to the good shepherd, Jesus Christ. I'd love to pray for us. Let's bow our heads.

Oh Father, thank you so much for this encouraging word. Lord, I pray particularly for those of us who are in the valley of the shadow of death even as I speak.

Many of us are very sick. Many of us know of people who are terminally ill. Many of us have trouble at home in the family.

[25 : 33] Many of us experience deep, dark, devastating depression. Lord, during this time we also think of the global financial state of depression.

I pray that we would see you as our good shepherd who hasn't abandoned us. We see you as our good shepherd who leads us even in the dark places.

I pray that we would focus on your rod and staff that comfort us. And above all, we would, with James, count it all joy when we fall into various trials.

Because we know that the testing of our faith produces perseverance. And perseverance produces hope. And hope doesn't fail us because we know that you've made a promise that we will dwell in your house with you forever.

I pray all this for Jesus' sake. Amen.