

Trusting the Good Shepherd

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 26th of August 2001.

The preacher is Lindsay Wilson. His sermon is entitled, Trusting the Good Shepherd, and is based on Psalm 23.

Psalm 23.

It's good to have something to look forward to, isn't it? I know you're all looking forward to Paul coming back, so let me not spoil it for you. Managing life seems to be getting harder and harder, doesn't it?

It's easy to be anxious in the world in which we live. Circumstances are not always easy. And we often feel, I think, wherever we are, that there are many things that threaten to overwhelm us.

[1 : 22] I remember when I first went to theological college, many years ago, now I should add. The thought of giving up a job I enjoy.

I was working there as a lawyer in the middle of the city of Sydney. Earning lots of money. Giving up a home, which we sold to go to college. Giving up a network of relationships, of friends and family. The thought of financial security. And it crossed our minds. It certainly crossed my parents' minds. But here was a great risk I was taking with their grandchildren.

Would God provide our needs? I was speaking with a friend last night whose husband is in business. Things are not going well for the business.

He did a particular project a little while ago. And he was so occupied with that for so many months that it dried up his usual sources of work. They're worried at the moment about whether they'll still be able to make ends meet by the end of the year.

[2 : 31] Whether they'll have to pull some of their children out of schools, the private schools they send them to. Will God provide their needs? I think of young married couples who are trying to buy a house in today's climate.

Think of those who want to buy in Doncaster to keep on coming to this church. But then look at the real estate prices and think, how will I ever be able to afford anything anywhere near Doncaster? I will ground and see many parents of young children here. And one of the things that exercises our thoughts and our prayers as parents is will our children have faith?

Given the vastly changed nature of society, will our children still come to love and serve the Lord Jesus when they're old enough to take on themselves those promises that have been pronounced for them in baptism?

I look around and see many who, if not retired, are looking to be retired in the near future. And I hear people, Christians and others, who wonder in the light of the many changes in government policy, constant changes to superannuation, constant messages from government, you won't be able to rely on your pension and you'll have to put enough superannuation away for your own future.

[4 : 10] Will you be able to provide for the future? Will your needs be met in retirement? And then I think even wider than that, I think around the world, Christians in Afghanistan who are in prison for their faith, Christians in many countries who are persecuted simply for being Christians, Christians who live on the breadline in many third world countries, asking questions, will God provide our needs?

Managing life seems to be getting harder and harder. And this will be an ongoing question through life, I think.

They tell me I'm at the right age now for a midlife crisis. You'll be pleased to know your vicar's probably got four or five years to go before he hits his midlife crisis.

It's hard to work out what Paul would do for a midlife crisis, but I'm sure it'll be something spectacular. So I'm open to suggestions as to what I should do for my midlife crisis. But as I look ahead, can I rely on God for what I really need in life? We've been thinking through some difficult issues at the college at Ridley.

[5 : 34] Can we trust that God will provide for the future needs of the ministry there? So in many situations we're asking questions of, will God provide our needs?

It's even more acute when we minister to those who face an ongoing disability or declining health. Or those who've recently lost a spouse or a child or a lifelong friend. And in such a situation when asked to take a funeral, I'm amazed by how often the family will ask to have read Psalm 23.

It's possibly the best known scripture in our community. And what does it do? It proclaims boldly that God will provide for us in our time of need.

It's a timely scripture and I want now to turn to it. There are two main images in this psalm. The Lord is the shepherd in the first part of the psalm and the Lord is the gracious host towards the end.

[6 : 45] Let me read to you the first four verses. 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 bright paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil.

For you are with me. Your rod and your staff. They comfort me. The image of God as a shepherd is a very apt one in that society.

It would have been easily understood by all who would have moved close to the hillsides in central Israel, dotted with animals. Whose very survival depended on the shepherds who cared for them. They realised that the whole flock could be secure if the shepherd cared for it properly. Perhaps it may not fit our society as well as it fitted the original hearers.

[7 : 51] I must admit, as I came out here on the expressway today, I didn't see any sheep on the hills. We do say that Australia is a country that's ridden on the sheep's back, but in fact there aren't too many in and around Doncaster, or at least none that I saw.

I wonder how Eskimos feel when they read this psalm. Or a Pacific Islander who may never have ever seen a sheep. It's certainly a problem too, because we're often not flattered to be thought of as sheep, are we?

I think there are few creatures as senseless as sheep. However, even if the image is not ours, a contemporary one in our community, the picture is astoundingly clear, isn't it?

And we can understand that what the shepherd is to the flock, so God is to his people. And the first and fundamental statement about God as the shepherd of his people is in the very first verse.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, or I shall lack nothing. It's a stunning phrase, it's so jarring in our culture.

[9 : 07] For we're taught to want everything. I shall not want, are you kidding? We have a business, advertising, which is designed to make us want, and to act on those wants.

I shall lack nothing, this psalm starts off with a confident assertion that we'll be provided for and protected. You could say that the theme of this psalm is that God is the only necessity of life. God is the only necessity of life. Indeed, it's I shall not want anything. There's not even any object to the phrase here.

It's not I shall want this and that and the other, but I may want something else. But I shall not want. It's a global statement. There's nothing that I shall want.

Verses 2 and 3 go on to explain what God provides. And sometimes I think we misunderstand the images there.

[10 : 14] We read it in terms of our own culture, rather than against the background of the time that it was written. Lying down in green pastures, walking beside still waters.

Often sounds to us like a Saturday picnic in an unspoilt natural park, doesn't it? And yet in a barren, dry culture, in the middle of Palestine, it's I think not giving a picture of peace and tranquility.

It's intended rather to say that the psalmist has been kept alive by God. Green pastures may be for us somewhere to run about in, but for a sheep, when they find greenery, it means something much more basic.

It means food, and therefore survival. Similarly being beside still waters is for us an idyllic picture, but it actually means here to have something to drink.

They tell me, and I'm not an expert on sheep, I must confess, that sheep don't like to drink from running water, but they much prefer still water.

[11 : 27] So the picture here is of a watering hole in the midst of a dry and barren land. So this too speaks of the provision of life-giving drink, balancing out the life-giving food of the green pastures for the first part of the verse.

So far from being an idyllic picture, it's a much more basic one. God provides the basic necessities. What we need, not everything that we might want.

Indeed, I think we're meant to understand verse 3, in the light of a shepherd guiding his sheep. In verse 3, he restores my soul, and the word for soul could mean life.

Indeed, a better way of translating could be, God keeps me alive. God restores my life by providing the food and the drink. A fairly basic provision, isn't it?

Being kept alive, an important one, an indispensable one, mind you, but a fairly basic provision. God keeps me alive. And that makes good sense, I think, in terms of the image, in terms of what follows.

[12 : 38] He leads me in right paths. For sheep in the hill country of Israel, that would mean avoiding falling into a hole, or falling prey to wild animals, going off the track and being lost, or caught in a thorn bush.

The shepherd keeps them alive and part of the flock, as he moves the flock from one place to another, to get food and water. Now, it is possible to translate this verse, he leads me in paths of righteousness, but it seems to me even those of you who have a high view of sheep must find it difficult to believe that animals with wool and overcoats can walk in paths of righteousness.

I think it is the right paths, the paths that are safe, the paths in which their life will be preserved. In that dangerous terrain, they are kept safe because of the guiding hand of the shepherd.

And the last part of this verse indicates that all this is to be done for his name's sake. God's loving care and provision is to establish the goals that he has for his people, the goals that he has for his world.

God's character and his loving purposes for his people are the ultimate reasons for the way God leads and guides and provides. What I find significant is that even though this metaphor, this image of the shepherd guiding the sheep is so clear, it's dwelt on at such length.

[14 : 24] Surely it would have been enough to say God provides for his sheep or God provides for his people as a shepherd provides for his sheep. Full stop.

End of story. That's all that needs to be said. After all, all the detail that's been unpacked hasn't given us any more information than that. And yet, that's not what the psalmist has done.

The psalmist wants us to linger on the things that we read here, to wait for them to sink in. It's not just designed to inform our minds, to give us some more information.

God provides for his people. Oh, I'd never thought of that. I must put that into my brain and remember that. No, we're meant to think about it, to reflect upon it, to meditate upon it.

For this is something that needs to shape and rearrange our lives. When we're tempted to organise and provide for our own needs in life, we need to come back to this fundamental, foundational point that it's God who provides for our every needs.

[15 : 34] God's the one who provides for the necessities. But God is, in a sense, the only necessity of life. And the more we linger, the more chance we have to be grateful and thankful to God for his care.

I think this is a psalm that's meant to be read slowly, perhaps over and over again, so that we can let the words sink in. Our world's in such a hurry.

Our God is not. And sometimes when we hurry, we get distracted from what's important, what's foundational. We get absorbed in the moment.

We get caught up in the rush. And we lose sight of God and the truths that he wants us to hear and base our lives on. Well, then we come, I think, in verse 4 to the real heart of the psalm.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Did you notice that the confidence of the psalmist is not based on everything being smooth sailing?

[16 : 52] Not based on people having an easy road through life. What do we find here? I fear no evil. Or I fear no disaster.

The word could mean either. In other words, the psalmist faced things like evil and disaster in his life. There were setbacks. There were trouble spots.

If we go over to verse 5, we see that he sets a table for me in the presence of my enemies. There were people that would oppose and seek to derail the psalmist in his life lived with God.

For that's our experience too. It's not a promise in this psalm that if we trust in God, everything will be easy and smooth, hassle-free, you will no longer have any burdens or troubles or opposition. No, that's assumed, that's a given, that's the context in which we're being invited and called upon to trust God.

[17 : 56] God is there in the midst of the troubles. It's described here as the darkest valley or as many of us would know it, the valley of the shadow of death.

A death, dark valley. It might just be talking about death but I think it's talking about something wider than that. Perhaps death is the worst case scenario as we think about the onset of death, the possibility of death, of troubles and difficulties that we face in life.

It's in that context as we walk through difficulties, a difficult path through life that we find that we can trust God.

And what is the basis of our trust in God? why can we trust in God? Well it's all there in verse 4 isn't it? Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil.

Why? For you are with me. For you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me. The confidence of the writer is not due to the absence of opposition or the presence of ease but it is the presence of the true and living God.

[19 : 11] You are with me. That's what brings comfort. That is what brings security. That's what enables trust. God is with us in times of strife and difficulty.

Even though there is strife, there is God. God is with us and the real issue of faith and confidence is not what we face but who is on our side.

There are hardships. If I were to speak to each of you individually, they will be different for each one. They are the things that cause us often to ask the question, can God still be trusted in our circumstances?

each of us will probably have times when we've acutely struggled with trusting God. There may have been a family tragedy or a personal setback, a debilitating illness, circumstances that we just cannot fathom what God is doing in this.

We come back to these words, even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me. They're hard words, but they're great comforting words.

[20 : 37] He's comforted too by the activity of God, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. They're probably similar to those of the modern Palestinian shepherds who have two staves.

One is a club to ward off robbers and wild animals who might attack the sheep. the other is the staff to guide the sheep, to bring them back, to tap them back into order.

As the shepherd reaches out and pulls back any of the flock that start to stray away. So the twin image here is one of God keeping us from straying and protecting us from danger, from real danger.

That's not where the psalm stops, it moves on for a second image in the last couple of verses of the psalm. 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 my whole life long. Here the image has changed to that of a host at a banquet, but has the message changed?

[21 : 49] I don't think it has. The gracious host does for the guest exactly what the shepherd did for the sheep. They provide food, you prepare a table before me, drink, my cup overflows, and shelter and protection in the presence of my enemies.

I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. So though the imagery is different, the message or thrust of the psalm is exactly the same. What is that?

God is the only necessity of life. Yes, life still will be difficult in the presence of enemies, it's never an easy place to be.

But in the midst of that situation, God has prepared and God will provide. And the picture here in verse 6 is one of God actively providing.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. God's God's goodness and his steadfast committed love chasing after, pursuing the writer of this psalm all his days as if he's being hounded by God's goodness and mercy.

[22 : 57] Is there anything better to be hounded by than God's goodness and mercy? God's actively pursuing him, God's seeking after him. It's a rich image that speaks about God's unshakable commitment to the psalmist, to his people, to you and me, that God's goodness and mercy shall pursue us all the days of our life.

And then the psalm finishes with that confidence statement that the writer will continue to trust in God and live in the presence of God as long as he lives, my whole life long.

This psalm is then very much a psalm of confidence and trust. It depicts God's provision under those two images, the image of God as a shepherd of his sheep, the image of God as a gracious host to his guest.

And in both metaphors it's seen that God is the one who provides, who protects, who can be trusted. It speaks powerfully of those like many of us who are experiencing a major upheaval in life. Some of us feel that we're always in some major upheaval of life or the other. But in those times we wonder whether God can be trusted, whether these circumstances are just too hard, whether life is too fast a pace now, whether God is too marginal to our society.

[24 : 34] We see long-standing relationships and marriages breaking up. We see homes in turmoil, even Christian homes. We see God's people overwhelmed or shaken by circumstances or changes.

And in a funeral service, this psalm gives the congregation strong words of trust to say in face of the enemy who has not yet destroyed the enemy of death.

However, these are not glib words, but rather radical words. They cut right across the thrust of our society and they say, I want nothing, I lack nothing, because God's my shepherd, God's my host. God is the only necessity in life. Sometimes I think this psalm is hijacked and we think of this psalm as a psalm only to be used for the suffering and the dying.

It's often used pastorally in that situation, that's why it's so commonly used. At funerals. Now it is a psalm of great comfort and I'm sure many of you have been comforted by a psalm like this and its key ideas at a time of grief and loss.

[25 : 51] But much more than being a psalm for the dying, this is a psalm for the living. And when I take a funeral that includes this psalm, I often say to those who are mourning the loss of a loved one, this is not a psalm for the person who's gone, but it's a psalm for the rest of us who have to get on with life.

It's a psalm, a challenge to us, that in the rest of our lives we can keep on trusting God. We can keep on knowing that God will provide for our needs because in the end God is the only necessity of life.

The New Testament doesn't actually pick up this psalm, but in the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, John chapter 10, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life to the sheep, he injects a new richness into the shepherd imagery of this psalm.

The Apostle Peter speaks of Jesus as the shepherd and guardian of our souls. Further on in his letter, Peter speaks of him as the chief shepherd, who will appear at the end of time to wind up history.

In the light of that, it's clear that our deepest need is in fact for a relationship with God through Christ. That is what God our shepherd has enabled through the sin-bearing death of the Lord Jesus on our behalf.

[27 : 23] God is the only necessity of life. If any, you think, or anyone other than God is shepherding us, controlling us, providing our needs, we will never be satisfied.

We will not be satisfied with material comfort or financial security, recognition by our peers, even long years of service in the church, however good many of those things might be.

Lord is our only necessity. The proper response to the good news of Psalm 23 and the good news of the Lord Jesus is to trust, to trust in the living God.

Psalm 23 overturns our cultural belief that it's all up to us, that our lives are our own. Life is a gift from God and God can be trusted to look after it in his own way, in his own time, with setbacks and difficulties, but always, for you are with me.

Psalm 23, like the Lord's supper, which we proclaim today, becomes an invitation to live under God's rule, to celebrate in solidarity with all God's people, to be reminded that God provides all we need.

[28 : 53] We live in a world which tells us how much more we keep on needing, how much more we deserve, but the truth is not found in the world, but in this psalm.

God is the only necessity in life. If we trust in God, he will provide all that we need. So let us seek God's kingdom and his righteousness first, and all that we need will be given to us as well by God, the good shepherd, the gracious host.

Let's pray. Our Lord God, these are both comforting words and challenging words.

Thank you that you provide all that we need. Thank you for your faithfulness over many years past.

Thank you that your goodness and mercy pursue us all the days of our life.

And please help us to trust in you and to live confidently as your people. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[30 : 08] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.