

You Are With Me

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[0 : 00] Turn in your Bibles again to Psalm 23. That will be the text of our meditations this morning. Now in 1977, possibly my favourite ever film was released, Star Wars A New Hope.

And in it we see something of a kind of daring rescue mission performed by the swashbuckling heroes Luke Skywalker and Han Solo.

They're going to save Princess Leia from the clutches of the Galactic Empire who had taken a prisoner. And so they get to the Death Star where Princess Leia is being held in the rescuer and they get out.

And Leia's obviously delighted and she says, well, that's great guys, thanks for doing this. I'm paraphrasing, obviously. And she's expecting them to join in the cause, to join in the rebel alliance and fight the darkness of the empire.

But Han Solo, one of the rescuers, he's got other ideas. And he says to the shocked Princess, I'm not in it for you, Princess. I'm not in it for the cause.

[1 : 21] I expect to be well paid. I'm in it for the money. Now Han Solo was being very honest, I suppose. There was no guile.

In him was no guile. He was, you know, an open book. I'm doing this because I want money. And you know, there are many Christian preachers who would, I think, not only commend Han for his honesty, but would say, Han, your desire to be well paid is a good desire and a godly desire.

And indeed something that the Lord promises to give in the gospel. These ministers, they speak about having your best life now. And they see the Christian life as a ticket to an existence full of health and wealth and prosperity.

They say, you know, you can be in the Christian life for the money to be well paid. And Han, if you just have enough faith, if you believe hard enough, if you confess the promises rigorously enough, then you'll have all these desires fulfilled.

Now I don't suspect that this kind of prosperity gospel, as it's called, is much of a problem for, you know, members of the Free Church of Scotland.

[2 : 46] As evangelicals, we don't seem to be susceptible to this kind of bald kind of greed in the name of Christ. But I think that maybe as evangelicals, while not adopting a prosperity gospel in such blunt terms, we maybe have imbibed unwittingly something of a soft prosperity gospel.

You see, we see the Christian life in terms of what it can do for us, of the joy that it can bring us, of the success that it may offer us.

You know, we see it as a spiritual alternative to the Rotary Club. You know, we have a network of pals. We have company. Maybe barbecues.

We've got a chance to maybe use our gifts in the church to serve, you know, to feel like we're part of something. And we see that this kind of ethos has been imbibed by the reaction when things don't seem to measure up in church.

You know, somebody might say something like, I get nothing out of that church. You know, nobody talks to me on a Sunday morning. Nobody listens to me. And often what the person means by that is, nobody is standing, listening to me, regaling them with stories and boring them silly.

[4 : 14] I had somebody saying that to me once. Nobody listens to me in that church. And respectfully, I said, well, who do you listen to? Have you approached anyone and asked them what's on their hearts?

And, you know, it was as if I was speaking a foreign language. You know, it kind of pierced this person's own self-pity. Or you might get someone else saying, you know, the church has grown so much, so many new people.

It's not what it used to be. You know, I liked it the way it was. I felt comfortable there. And in essence, what that is, that's basically saying I want the church to shrink. I want the kingdom of God to shrink so that I feel comfortable with it.

Again, it's all about me and my desires. Another area can be marriage and relationships. You know, we can imbibe the Disney narrative that there's going to be a happy ever after.

That we're going to meet our prince or a princess. You know, we think that, well, I'm not going to marry an own Christian, but, you know, I'm going to find a Ryan Gosling who can lead a Bible study.

[5 : 20] That's what I'm in it for. But some of us never meet that marriage partner. It's the way of it. And others do.

And I'm thinking of a situation from my own context. Somebody thought they'd met the woman of their dreams and married this person and it's turned out to be an absolute nightmare.

The person's turned out to have a narcissistic personality disorder and this poor brother is suffering grievously. And so, when a soft prosperity gospel doesn't work out, you know, everything was going to be alright in the night.

God was going to set everything in place. All my ducks in a row. Sure, I'm not asking for riches, but I would quite like everything just to be settled the way I would like it.

When it doesn't work out that way, we cry out, Lord, what's happening? You know, it wasn't meant to be this way. That marriage partner wasn't supposed to walk out on me.

[6 : 22] I wasn't meant to lose my job. I wasn't meant to be stuck in this wilderness for 40 years. And the book of Proverbs tells us that hope deferred makes the heart sick.

In other words, when you long for something, when you've been yearning for something and hoping for something, and it doesn't materialise, it makes your heart sick. It kills you on the inside.

You become embittered. And there's a lot of Christians, I suspect, who have sick hearts. That for which they hoped never happened.

And as a result, they say, well, the faith, the faith's failed me. God didn't come through with his promises. He said, an abundant life, my life is less than abundant.

But part of the problem is that the thing for which they longed was never promised. It was never part of the deal. It was never offered in God's covenant.

[7 : 25] The covenant in Scripture is a massive theme. And in some, it's like the deal that God offers his people. It's a kind of crude way to put it, to talk about a deal.

Because God is completely gracious to us. He lays out the terms and fulfills the terms. But we nevertheless need to respond. And Psalm 23 is about God's covenant and what he promises to do for his people.

Now someone might say to me, well, you're talking about covenant, but the word covenant's not there. There's no hint of covenant there. And that's true. The word covenant isn't in the passage. But the passage itself is shot through with covenantal language and covenantal terms. Look, for instance, at how the psalm itself is bracketed.

It begins with the Lord, capital letters in verse 1. And it finishes with the Lord, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. It's like the name of the Lord bookends, the psalm.

[8 : 31] We call it an inclusio. And the Lord in capital letters, when you read that in the Bible, that is the name by which God disclosed himself to the people of Israel in Exodus chapter 3, verse 14.

He says, I'm entering into a relationship with you. And you know me from now on as I am Yahweh, or the Lord, as our English translations render it.

And so when you see the capital letters Lord in the Bible, it's a reminder of the God of the covenant. That great I am who cannot change, he doesn't change.

And his faithfulness to the covenant will never waver at all. The covenant is as unchanging as God himself. Even the words in the psalm here, righteousness, that's living up to the terms of the covenant.

God's goodness, God's mercy, these are covenant words. Goodness is what God will show himself to be in the covenant. As you come into this relationship, you will discover a good God.

[9 : 39] And the mercy will be an expression of that goodness because you're going to fail God again and again. And God says, I will give you goodness, I will show my goodness through my mercy to you.

And so my argument here is that this passage is about the covenant terms and what God offers in the covenant. And what God offers in the covenant essentially is himself.

If you look at verse 4, he says, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Now these words there, you are with me, these occur right in the center of the psalm.

In the Hebrew rendering, there are 26 lines above you are with me and there are 26 lines below you are with me. And the psalmist as a poet, he employs all these literary devices to make a point. When he puts something right at the center so obviously like that, that's what he wants us to grasp. Here's what I offer in the covenant, my presence. David is crying out, you are with me, my God, even in the darkest valley.

[10:54] And that's the covenant terms. That's the beauty of what the Lord is offering us. He doesn't offer us presents. He offers us his presence. He comes to us and gives of himself.

And so the self-giving of the Lord in this passage comes to us by means of two images. God gives himself to us as a shepherd who leads and he gives himself to us as a host who feeds.

A shepherd who leads and a host who feeds. We'll look firstly then at the shepherd. Here we have the shepherd promising to lead his people.

And I've broken this down into three sections. The shepherd has promised to lead his people to restoration and faithfulness and through darkness.

Towards restoration and faithfulness and through darkness. Firstly then if you look at restoration we see this in verses 1, 2 and the first half of verse 3.

[12:05] 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.

And this is if we bear in mind these are the words of David the king of Israel. And he's saying that this covenant God he is he's my shepherd.

This is quite striking imagery I would argue because David knew what he was talking about because as we all know he used to be a shepherd himself. And the Lord spoke to David in 2 Samuel chapter 7 and verse 8 he said I took you from the pasture from following the sheep that you should be prince over my people Israel.

So the shepherd in these ancient times would follow the sheep wherever they went as they grazed he would be there behind them watching over them protecting them.

And here we have the ruler of all Israel the kind of president if you like of the superpower of the day and he's saying I have all these armies at my disposal he was a mighty man of war who slew giants killed lions and bears when he was a shepherd he was a scary guy he was a guy with a lot going for him but he said you know in the presence of Yahweh the Lord the covenant God I'm still one of the wee sheep.

[13:34] You see David despite his accomplishments had never graduated to self-sufficiency he called himself a sheep now if you think about the image of a sheep it's hardly complimentary you know those of us who have been to the Hebrides and seen sheep it's not really complimentary you know they've got these dead eyes you know as they munch away at the grass they jump through barbed wire fences they cut themselves they're just very stupid animals in my own opinion they'll run right in front of your car at the last minute and David says here in the presence of the Lord I'm like one of the sheep and I think what it's communicating here what David is saying here is I'm just purely totally dependent upon the Lord I'm one of the sheep despite being the king I'm still one of the little ones and when we think of sheep and dependence and we think of them without the shepherd we see something of their vulnerability because without the shepherd the sheep won't find pasture without the shepherd the sheep are going to be vulnerable and I think it's quite notable the kind of juxtaposition if you like of God's description of David as a shepherd and David's description of the Lord as a shepherd

David followed the sheep he just had to go where they went but this shepherd he leads the sheep he strides ahead of the sheep and without him the sheep will go hungry without him the sheep are vulnerable there was lions there was bears in the ancient Near East you know the the land was subject to you know drought and famine and so they needed needed the shepherd and so the one application we can take away here is no matter how long we've been going in the Christian life no matter how advanced we've become in our knowledge no matter our experiences of service within the church we're always dependent we're always dependent all we can offer the Lord is pure dependence on our sins that's what we bring to the table in the arrangement and the covenant promise of God here as shepherd is to provide for the needs of the sheep

I think it's notable here the the tenses of the verbs that are used they're all future tenses or imperfect tenses for instance when David says I shall not want we've seen rendered in other ways I lack nothing it says in the NIV but this is a kind of imperfect this is a future tense he says the Lord is my shepherd I will not want this is a future thing because right now it seems that he is in want that it's the end of the dry season and the sheep don't have water they've not found pasture and so they're hungry they're thirsty but David says even in that experience I shall not want he's confident he's saying this shepherd who's leading the flock even though all I see is aridity and dryness and straw that's not good for eating this shepherd will lead me beside calm waters and make me lie down in green pastures you have the still waters here the image of drink of abundant water of satiation we see the vegetation here as well the green pastures and when you think about a flowing stream and about abundant vegetation what that serves to do is cast our minds back to the original place of abundant vegetation and flowing streams in the Garden of Eden and so there is a picture here I would say of restoration of God leading his people via the shepherd to his covenant presence the presence of God in the Garden and it seems to be

I suppose summed up in David's parallel statement he restores my soul now when we read about the soul being restored we have this idea of the inward part of me you know the non-material bit and the Lord will restore me on the inside but that's too narrow a reading in the Hebrew when he talks about his soul he's talking about the whole person body soul spirit rejuvenation he's speaking about here he's saying I'm confident that though I'm going through a dry period though I hunger though I thirst the shepherd is leading the shepherd is driving me on to green pastures to quiet waters to total rejuvenation and so I would argue that primarily this language that is being employed here when you cast it back to that of the garden the place of vegetation and water and rest I would argue that what David is writing about here is primarily the blessings associated with the spirit this is spiritual language and it points forward to what Christ himself would provide as a shepherd Jesus said he spoke about rest you know he restores my soul he makes me lie down Jesus says in Matthew 11 28 come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls then in John 7 37 to 38 do you thirst will come to me and drink whoever believes in me as the scripture has said out of his heart will flow rivers of living water there will be times in our lives where we experience dry seasons barren times in our walk with the Lord we feel his absence more than his nearness not that we should be living by our feelings but often in our prayers we have a sense of his nearness present to the eyes of faith but often in our prayers too when we're praying we just feel like our prayers are hitting the ceiling that the heavens are as brass we feel restless we feel that we are not at peace and the whole thing the whole experience of the

[20 : 21] Christian life feels like a slog and a treadmill where parts were brittle were little sheep exhausted and hungry at the end of dry season and the psalmist is saying here don't lose confidence in your shepherd he's been leading you he's taken you through the dry valley he's taken you through the barren fields and he's leading you towards green pastures he's leading you from restlessness to rest fullness he's leading you from thirst to satiation keep trusting him keep holding on to him weeping may last for a night but joy comes in the morning so he's leading us to restoration even through these barren periods and these barren periods we have to see as part of our journey part of our pilgrimage part of our journey with the shepherd so secondly then God as shepherd leads us not only to restoration but he leads us in faithfulness

God promises to lead his people and it says here along paths of righteousness for his name's sake and that's in the second half of verse three as I already mentioned the word righteousness is a covenant word it's basically a life which has aligned itself to the terms of the covenant God has made and the psalmist here David is saying the shepherd is going to ensure my faithfulness to the covenant he's going to lead me along the right paths the righteous paths the paths that please him you know we need to reckon with this that God has laid down paths of righteousness upon which we should walk you know we don't have this cheap grace idea where we trust in Christ use him as our ticket to heaven and then just get on with living the way we want to live no we live lives marked by holiness by righteousness by obedience the author to the Hebrews says in verse 14 of chapters 12 without holiness no one will see the Lord and you know the way we live the path on which we walk it shows the journey and the destination that we are traveling to if we're living lives of self indulgence of godlessness of thoughtlessness about the

Lord and his ways if the Lord is just a passing kind of thought to us and we're walking on this road of self gratification that's the path that leads to destruction but a path of holiness a path of struggle a path through the dark places a path through the narrow gate as Jesus called it that few find that is the path that leads to heaven the author to the Romans Paul says if you live according to the flesh you will die but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live it's not that we're saved by walking on the path but because we are saved we walk on the path to heaven and if you don't know Christ and you're walking a life of self-indulgence you're walking away from Christ to destruction and many of us I think that are of a tender disposition and of a sensitive conscience we can have fear when we hear words like that but the psalmist doesn't want us to fear the Lord is my shepherd

I will fear no evil he causes me to walk the right paths for his name's sake he's going to ensure your faithfulness he's going to ensure that you keep the terms of the covenant that you're going to keep walking with the Lord even when you feel you don't have any strength left it is the shepherd who is in control of this this is the promise of the covenant isn't it I will write my laws in their hearts and inscribe them on their minds I will put my spirit within them and cause them to follow my decrees and commands and laws God will ensure your faithfulness and trust that to him be honest to him about your fears about your sins say to him Lord I don't think I can do this I don't think I can keep this up and the words will come back he will cause you to walk the right paths for his name's sake his own honour is bound up in this covenant he has a vested interest in causing you to grow in holiness now this doesn't mean when it tells us we will walk along the right paths this doesn't mean that we will always make good decisions it doesn't mean that we will always make godly decisions indeed some of our decisions are going to be shockingly bad the Lord doesn't promise to infallibly guide us into a successful career or marriage as I said at the start but what he does promise is he does promise to help us live godly lives in the midst of even our bad decisions he will cause us to walk the path of covenant faithfulness for his name's sake so don't be scared for these passages that you read in scripture the hard passages when it speaks about without holiness no one will see the Lord or if you don't mortify the flesh you'll die this is God's work that he will accomplish turn your concerns over to the shepherd and tell him

I'm scared that I'm going to walk paths of immorality of godliness Lord Jesus lead me along the righteous paths for your name's sake for your honour so the shepherd will lead us to restoration he will lead us towards faithfulness but he'll also lead us through the darkness darkness and I like the realism here of verse 4 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 so here the sheep they've followed the shepherd through the dry and barren wilderness where there's no food where there's no water where there's no place to lie down and they're anticipating things getting better but things are getting worse because the shepherd hasn't taken them to this place of vegetation and rest instead he's taken them into the valley the dark place the place where they can be ambushed where the predators can you know hunt in the dark and not be seen and David

[27 : 31] I think is speaking from his own experience here we remember what he endured living in caves being chased by Saul having to abdicate from the throne because of his own son and being pursued by armed men David had the worst experiences imaginable but yet amazingly you can say here I will fear no evil you see for David it didn't matter whether he was sitting on the throne or whether he was alone in a cave all that mattered to David was you are with me as I mentioned this is the heartbeat of the psalm and he knows that if the Lord is with him he has everything he needs he has the almighty one at his side the shepherd here is described as a rough man with a staff and a rod and the rod originally would have been something a bit shorter than a long staff it would have been like a cosh for close combat and the staff was a little bit longer and shepherds were tough guys they were rough men you know

David himself as I mentioned in 1 Samuel 17 verses 34 to 35 he talked about beating up lions and bears that had stolen from the flock shepherds were rough men and David is saying I've got this tender shepherd with me but he's not just a tender shepherd he's a powerful shepherd he's a shepherd in whom I can put my confidence because he won't permit anything which is going to be ultimately damaging to my walk with him to enter into my life and the shepherd is confident leading me through this dark and dangerous valley because he has a rod and he has a staff I will fear no evil this is the heartbeat of the psalm this is the amazing promise of the covenant God as his shepherd drawing near to his people there were promises throughout scripture that God would

shepherd his people psalm 77 verse 20 says that when Israel came out of Egypt the Lord led his people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron there was God as the shepherd for the Old Testament church but he promised that a future shepherd would come through Isaiah in chapter 40 verse 11 and this shepherd would tend his flock he would gather the lambs in his arms he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are young here's this tender shepherd but he's not soft he has a rod he has a staff he's capable of protecting you and this shepherd as we well know is the Lord Jesus Christ himself John chapter 10 verses 14 through 18 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 no one takes my life from me but I lay it down of my own accord I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again this charge I have received from my father here's the

Lord talking about the darkest valley that any of us will ever face and that is the valley of death itself we will all experience death unless the Lord returns before then we will all go through that dark experience but we can be confident because our shepherd has gone through the darkest valley himself with his rod and his staff he succumbed he gave himself over to death and death didn't take him he says I lay my life down no one takes my life from me and similarly for us for you for me no one will take your life from you it will be the shepherd himself he decides when and how you will die and so I need us to be confident today the psalmist is encouraging us to be confident in the power of the shepherd not only for when we face life's trials but for when we face the ultimate trial of death itself and we can be confident in our death because he suffered the death we should have he went through the valley we deserved that the valley for us would be no valley at all you see death for us now those who trust Christ death isn't something for us to be feared as the apostle

Paul says it's something to be anticipated he says I want to depart and be with Christ death was the kind of consummation of Paul's relationship with the shepherd death is kind of like the translation into the presence of God that we will ultimately experience and we can see with confidence though I walk through this dark valley I will fear no evil for you are with me not all deathbed experiences are you know ones of joy and anticipation waiting to enter the presence of God I heard Martin

Lloyd-Jones say that often he knew of men and women in his congregation who were assailed by doubts the evil one attacked them on their deathbed and told them they had been hypocrites all their lives that they hadn't trusted in Christ that they hadn't really followed the shepherd and Lloyd-Jones is saying you know that could be a dark valley for each and every one of us but the shepherd will lead us through even that painful experience and if he can lead us through that experience he can lead us through lesser experiences you know unemployment loneliness marital strife illness and the joy for us will be in these experiences that you are with me Lord you are with me your covenant presence to be with me no matter what because it's a fear bursting promise if he's there you need fear nothing

[34 : 10] I think many of us live with a fear of what's around the corner you know am I going to contract this illness what if I leave my children you know without a parent what if I lose my job what if I lose my house and often fear is worse than the actual event itself and let the covenant promises here therefore drain you of fear know that your steps have been ordered by the shepherd he's taken you through the wilderness and when just when you thought things were going to improve he took you into a dark valley but he does have a destination in view now I'm going to cut this short because I've gone on longer than I should so I'm going to miss out the host who feeds just so that I'm not testing your patience in conclusion David says that the Lord is a shepherd who guides his people to restoration to faithfulness and in darkness

David you see culminates the psalm by saying I'm going to dwell in the house of the Lord this covenant God forever David has an end time view through his sufferings and through his experiences and he's anticipating a time when he will no longer hunger when he will no longer thirst when he will no longer experience hostility and adversity when he will no longer fear and it says in Revelation chapter 7 verses 15 through 17 that this end time hope that David expresses here in the psalm is offered through Christ the redeemed are before the throne of God and they serve him day and night in his temple he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence they shall hunger no more neither thirst any more they will be beside the streams of water and in the green pastures the sun will not strike them nor any scorching heat there will be no more drought for the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes look at the absurdity of the passage here

the lamb has become a shepherd the lamb is leading the flock and I would argue that this has echoes of

Christ as God becoming man becoming one of the sheep being slaughtered like a sheep that we might not face slaughter I would challenge us today do we have the lamb as our shepherd have we trusted that the lamb's death is the death that we deserved the punishment he endured is one that we deserve have we reckoned with just the scandalous grace involved here that he suffers that we might go free let us reckon with that and ask ourselves the question have I been reconciled to God through the lamb or maybe you're a Christian a seasoned Christian and you have this hope deferred which has made your heart sick maybe it's time to realign our expectations and our hopes and set our hope fully on the grace to be given when the Lord Jesus is revealed God as I said doesn't give us presence he gives us presence make Christ your joy make him your hope make him your delight and if he's not cry out to God until he creates within you that delight in

Christ which allows you to say Christ is enough for you are with me I will fear no evil may God bless to us his word this morning we will conclude our worship in the words of Psalm 23 from Sing Psalms Psalm 23 from Sing Psalms the Lord is my shepherd no one shall I know makes me lie down where the green pastures grow he leads me to rest where the calm waters flow standing peaceças nas Lord pas to not me tam we are you you