

The Shepherd's Care

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[0:00] We'll turn back to our reading in the book of Psalms, Psalm 23, and just look at the whole of this psalm together. We can read just the first couple of verses before we go into it.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. How often have you heard this psalm? How often have you heard it read or how often have you sung this psalm?

Perhaps many of you, you know it off by heart. It's a psalm that many of us learned, whether it was in day school or Sunday school, learned all of these words off by heart.

But it's the most sung psalm in Scripture. And it's amazing just how often it's sung in the sense of the kinds of occasions that it's sung at.

It can be very happy occasions or it can be very sad occasions that these words are sung. And that's just a reminder to us that in this psalm there's a whole experience of our lives summed up.

[1:07] Whatever situation we are going through, there is a reminder to us in this psalm. So we may be very familiar with it, but there's also a danger with familiarity.

There's a danger with being familiar with these words, but not knowing what these words are actually saying to us. Not understanding what they are saying to us.

Just take the opening words of the psalm. The Lord is my shepherd. It trips off our tongues so easily. But if we just stop there, you know these words well, but what do the words mean?

What do they mean to you today? What do they say to you? Do you know this Lord as your shepherd? And as you go on and read this psalm, as we go on and sing this psalm, what do the words go on to say about the care of the shepherd, of the shepherd's leading?

What does it mean to you? You see, there's two problems with familiarity. There's two sayings that are often used. One is familiarity breeds contempt.

[2:21] And that means that when we have a close knowledge of someone or something, it can lead to a lack of respect. Familiarity breeds contempt.

And that can be true of this psalm. Perhaps it's been true in your own experience. Or perhaps in your own experience, it's true today that this is the way that you think of this psalm.

And you're familiar with it, but it breeds contempt because it speaks of the Lord as a shepherd and the different experiences that we can go through. And because of maybe trials you've gone through or different experiences you've had, you start to question God or wonder, is there a God?

Or why does he allow certain things to happen? So is that you today? Does a familiarity with this psalm, does it breed contempt in your heart? Or another saying is familiarity breeds complacency. And complacency is something that can be true with this psalm as well. We can just, as we say, hear it or sing it so often, but not really take in what it actually means for us.

[3:32] We can become complacent with these words. Maybe at first it's got a real sense of power to us, but as time goes on, we become complacent with it.

Think of the example of starting a new job. You're going to start a new job. Also, the first maybe few months, you're turning up early, showing that you're keen.

You're on your best behavior. You're listening, paying close attention to all the details, diligently going about your work. But over time, as you become more comfortable, you become complacent. And so instead of turning up early, you turn up on time. Instead of listening to everything, you just listen to what you think you need to know. You start to look at where corners can be cut.

And then over time, you become more and more complacent. Once you figure out the limits, you maybe start turning up late because nothing's being said. You cut corners. All of these kinds of things can come in and become complacent.

[4:40] And that's the way we can be with this psalm as well. And it's the same true of the Lord in your life. Do you love him? Or have you loved him and now maybe becoming complacent with him?

Do you use him in that sense? Where you see that God is only there when you need him or when you want something from him. And these words, when we say, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, I shall not lack.

We bring them to him then and say, but God, you have said. But we ignore him the rest of the time. So there can be a familiarity with this psalm. One way it can breed contempt.

Another way it can breed complacency. But we always want to come back to it and see what this psalm is saying to us. Reminding us of how we are to walk with the Lord close to him and know the shepherd's care.

And the cluster of psalms here, 22, 23, and 24, they speak of the shepherd in different ways. 22, speaks about the shepherd as he dies for his sheep.

[5:49] This 23 speaks as a shepherd as he cares for his sheep. And then 24 speaks about the shepherd who's coming for his sheep, that he is going to return.

So this morning we're just going to think for a short time on the shepherd who cares for his sheep. We all go through different experiences in our lives.

And as a congregation, as a people, we know whether it's ourselves or others who are going through a variety of different trials and experiences just now.

But we pray that these words will help us to bring us close to God. And not just for us to come close, but us to bring others close to God as well. It to be a prayer for people to know the Lord as a shepherd in these days for each and every one of us.

And the first thing we see in this psalm is a declaration. A declaration. David, the psalmist here, we can be familiar with his life.

[6:52] David, who was a shepherd himself, a shepherd boy who was called by God to be a king for his people. And so he was familiar with the whole idea of what it meant to be, a shepherd.

And now he's writing these words, seeing who his shepherd is. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. And just these opening words of David, he doesn't say the Lord is a shepherd.

He's not a shepherd like me. He's saying the Lord is my shepherd. He is seeing his own need. And he's seeing that it is the Lord who is able to help him in his need.

The Lord is my shepherd, he says as well. So it's ongoing. It's in that tense where you see this is David's experience day to day.

The Lord is my shepherd. You could almost say still to this day, the Lord is David's shepherd. And for ourselves, it reminds us that God still speaks in this way to us, reminding us of our need for a shepherd.

[8:06] As we read in John chapter 10, another great passage that reminds us of Jesus who is the good shepherd there for his people. In John 10 verse 4 it says, There is that calling of the shepherd and there is that people who are following the voice of the shepherd.

That's what David is doing here. Is that what you're doing in your life today? Are you hearing that call of the shepherd to follow him?

And are you following him? You see, this is a declaration of trust. From the very outset, David is saying, The Lord is my shepherd.

There is a trust there. And as he looks at the Lord as his shepherd, he realizes then that he will not want, he will not lack, as he knows the Lord as his shepherd.

Do you ever say to the Lord as you pray, Lord, I want. Not in the sense of lack as it is here, but I want. I want something. We come with our demands.

[9:24] You come with your demands too. Lord, I want you to do this. I want you to change this. What are you asking of the Lord in your prayer?

It's not that we would, that he would give us everything that we want. But as David is saying here, it's more, I will not want in the sense of, I will not lack.

That when we are trusting in him, the Lord will provide what we need. Not so much what we want, but what we need.

Because you see when he goes on in verse 2 to say, He makes me lie down in green pastures. There's this sense of, this scene is something beautiful, something plentiful, and something that's easy to find.

The shepherd just leads from one green pasture to another. But that was not the case. It wasn't the case for David as a shepherd or any shepherd in these days.

[10:27] It was hard to find these green pastures. It was hard to find these places with the waters to quench the thirst. We have maybe the opposite problem here in Scotland and our own island.

The struggle is to find dry ground. The struggle here was to find a place that wasn't dry, that wasn't hard, but that was well watered, that had lush grass.

And so the shepherd very often would have to lead great distances. Moving through barren ground, hot areas, difficult terrain, all of these things with wild animals all around.

And so the green pastures were hard to find. But the good shepherd led them to these places.

Again, as a reminder to us that there are these dry experiences, these difficult experiences in our own life.

Times of barrenness. But as we're looking to the shepherd, to the good shepherd, he is able to bring us to these places of refreshing as well. And so do you know this shepherd today as he leads you through all of these experiences in life?

[11:39] The question that this raises from David in this psalm is, how do we know this shepherd? How can you know this shepherd today? Well, again, we go back to John chapter 10 to a verse we didn't read, but it says in verse 27 of chapter 10, My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

And so this declaration that David makes, the Lord is my shepherd, it leads to that question for us, how can I know the Lord as my shepherd?

Well, it's what Jesus says in John 10, 27. My sheep hear my voice, and my sheep follow me. And so the two questions that arise from that are, are you listening to him, and are you following him? If you want the Lord as your shepherd, it's to listen and to follow. That's the declaration that David makes here.

He is listening, and he is following the Lord. Are you today, in that sense, listening and following him?

[12:59] So we have the good shepherd and the declaration that David makes, but we also then have a sense of restoration as we turn to verse 3. He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. And 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 these two verses, they remind us of the restoration that the good shepherd gives. And the first thing is, he says there, he restores my soul.

The shepherd gives life. A shepherd, in the ordinary sense of an ordinary shepherd, he couldn't give life, but he sought to provide care that kept life.

But Jesus is the one who gives life, because he's no ordinary shepherd. He is the Son of God who came into this world.

[14:12] And so, as we look to Jesus, we see one who finds his sheep. And it's where he finds his sheep, as described by Paul in Ephesians 2, verse 1, who are dead in their trespasses and sins.

That's the way we are as a sheep. We are a sheep who have gone astray. And yet he is able to restore. He is able to restore our soul.

He is able to give life. The word restore means to bring back. And that's what the Lord Jesus does for his people. He brings back that life that was dead in sin.

And a life that then we are able to live for him. But when you look at these words, it's not just applying to us. But we see them first and foremost applying to the Lord Jesus himself.

Because, as you read and as we sing often in verse Psalm 16 as well, the soul is not left to decay, it says.

[15:17] And that's speaking of the Lord Jesus. And here we are reminded that Jesus was one who gave his life, but who took his life up again.

It's a great reminder to us as we approach the time of Easter and remembering the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And look at verse 4 and how that applies to the Lord Jesus as well.

Through the valley of the shadow of death as he went to the cross, as he died there for our sins.

There's a reminder here that the good shepherd has experienced all of this himself.

And so the life that he is able to give is a life that he has given for us, that we might have life through him. And so the shepherd here provides life.

He is life because he gave his own life. But the good shepherd also leads his sheep. And again we see that both in verse 2 and verse 4.

[16:20] So that whether the paths lead us through the still waters, the green pastures, or whether the path leads us through the deep valley as described in verse 4 here, the valley of the shadow of death, there is that promise of his presence.

I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. The shepherd's tools were the rod and the staff.

One to catch, one to direct. Always used to keep the sheep on the right path, whatever experience they were going through. And it's a powerful reminder to us here of how often maybe we don't like the paths that we are being taken on.

But that when we find it difficult, even in the valley of the shadow of death, we have the promise of the shepherd who is near. And there's a temptation here for us all, for you and for me, in terms of where we go in our time of need.

It's to often think that the grass is greener in some other way. That we don't need the Lord, that the Lord doesn't care about us. And therefore we go and look for that comfort, that care somewhere else.

[17:44] The grass is greener. We are like sheep. We wander off. And so the question is, what path are we on today? What way are we going?

What way are we turning, even in the midst of times of hardness? Yes. The Bible speaks about two paths we can go, the broad road and the narrow road.

The broad road is often the easy way to go and the easy way to turn. But it says it leads to destruction. But the narrow path, although it may be difficult, although it may be hard, it's the one that leads to everlasting life.

And so which path are you on today? Which way are you going with the shepherd? Are you turning away from him and going your own way? Or are you turning to him that he might lead you?

We like to be independent in many ways. Are you an independent person? Are you one who says, well, I'm going to do it, but I'll do it my way?

[18:50] And we're quite dogmatic. We see it in some sort of courage now to think for yourself and to do your own thing. And all of these kinds of ideas to be trailblazers.

And there was a saying that said, do not follow where the path may lead you. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail. And that's kind of the attitude that many people will take.

Perhaps it's your attitude today, the way that you want to go. It's not to find the path to go and that you're being led on, but instead to find a place where there's no path and to leave a trail.

It's that selfish, independent attitude. But instead we are to look to the Lord because you could say the only one who has gone away where there was no path and left a trail is the Lord Jesus.

Because he's the only one who could go the way of the cross and give his life in this way and leave a path for us to follow. I'm sure many of you have been involved in sheep over the years and taking them out to the moor.

[20:00] I can't say it's my favorite pastime, but I often enjoyed going out the moor because it was just the openness of it. And as you were taking either gathering sheep or taking sheep out, you would find there was always well-throdden paths that the sheep would follow.

And this is the way you would often follow them as well. But there was also reminders of what it meant to go off that path. Where you would see a sheep who's maybe gone off in its own direction, gone its own way and become stuck because it's gone off the proper path.

And it's a reminder to us as well of what path are we on? Are we going the way the Lord has gone? Or are we thinking we know a better way and a way that we can find peace for ourselves?

And we only end up stuck in this life, lost in this life. So he's giving us a way. He's giving us a promise that he is with us as well.

Because you see here, the sheep are passing through the valley of the shadow of death. And even though there are times when as the Lord's people, we have to go through the most frightening and the most dangerous of places, we have a promise of a companion, of a companion who will never leave us.

[21:25] And that was David's confidence. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. That we will be able to say that ourselves today.

even though we go through the valley of the shadow of death. And we do. We all do. And we know others who are going through it even now.

But we have to see that the Lord is there for us. And notice how it says the valley of the shadow of death. It's like the shadow is over us.

But a shadow cannot harm us. There was a father who was driving to his wife's funeral with his children.

And as they were traveling along the road, they stopped at some traffic lights. And in front of them was a big lorry, a big lorry with a trailer on the back.

[22:24] Because it was wintertime, there was a long shadow being cast from the lorry across into the field beside the road. And the father said to the children, look at the shadow of that truck.

If you had to be run over, would you rather be run over by the shadow or the truck itself? And one of the children was piped up from the back.

The shadow, of course, because that cannot hurt anybody. And the way he went on to explain it then was to remember that Jesus let the truck strike him.

So that all we could have was the shadow that would not destroy us. And he went on to say that because her mother was a Christian and because Jesus had taken upon himself all that pain of death, that it was only the shadow that had been cast on her.

That even now, death passed over her because she was alive with the Lord. And that's what this psalm speaks of, the valley of the shadow of death.

[23:36] Because of what Jesus has done for us, we know that he bore that pain on the cross. That it's only the shadow that comes on us.

Because Jesus said, I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly. And the gospel of John is full of life. Life to the full.

And today, I know some of you are going through your own grief. You go through your worries and your fears and all of these things are the valley of the shadow of death.

But we can take heart because the Lord is with us. He will not let his people go. And he is there to comfort by his rod and his staff.

He came that we might have life in him. So we have that sense of restoration. He brings back.

[24:37] He gives life. He helps even in the valley of the shadow of death. death. The final thing we see here just briefly is there's preparation. In verse 5 and verse 6, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

So there's a sense here of a feast, of rejoicing, that he brings us through, but that he is preparing a better way, a better place for his people.

That Christ, in Christ, we have victory. Romans 8 is full of that as it speaks of nothing being able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Not even death can separate us from that love. And so here he is saying he is preparing a place for his people. And when you look at, again, the Gospel of John as Jesus was going to the cross, as he was with his disciples before he went out to the cross, what does he say?

He says, let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. And I go to prepare a place for you.

[25:58] So there's preparation. He is going to prepare a place for you. and he has prepared all things for his people.

He has prepared for us for this day while we are here on earth. And he says here that he gives a cup that overflows. You could ask yourself, then how is your cup today?

Even in the difficulties and trials that we face, if you are trusting in the Lord, he is able to make your cup overflow. In these days of David's time, if you are visiting and you were a guest in a house, the host would keep filling the glass as he was enjoying your company.

But when the time was over, when the evening was coming to a close, the host to indicate that it was time to leave, instead of filling the cup up to the top, would instead only half fill it.

And that was the indication it's time to go. As long as the cup was being filled, you were there and you were enjoying his company, and he would say, he would be saying, I'm liking, I'm enjoying your company, stay for a while longer.

[27:18] Well, that's the image that we have here. Not just the host filling the cup, but the cup is overflowing. He longs to be with his people.

And so he promises help for today to his people. He says in verse 6, Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. He gives grace.

That's what goodness and mercy sum up to. It sums up to the grace of God that follow all the days of my life. He is there to give us that grace for everything that we need.

And so what do you want for this life day by day? Where do you find your help? You can find it in the grace that he gives, in the goodness and mercy that he gives day by day.

But it says too that there is more to come. What do you want for eternity? Do you desire God's house forevermore?

[28:25] That should be the longing of every Christian. To know that hope that there is a place not just here but for all eternity that we can dwell in his house forever.

And that's what the shepherd does. He leads us in this life. He leads us by his grace day by day but always with that reminder that there is more to come.

And so this psalm is a psalm of great comfort. Comfort in every experience. Comfort day by day. Comfort through times of joy and times of sorrow that he gives grace for all of our needs.

We are familiar with this psalm. You are familiar with it I'm sure. But what does it stir up in your soul today? Does it stir up that contempt where still you say but God he allows all these difficulties.

How can he be a gracious God? Well we can see it because of what he has done for us in giving his son to take that death upon himself so that only the shadow could touch us.

[29:45] But it can also breed complacency where we become complacent with the Lord. And if that's you today if you are one who is complacent today perhaps it's time to ask yourself do I need to return to the Lord in this way?

Do I need to come back and see for myself the Lord as my shepherd again? We all need the Lord as our shepherd.

Somebody said about this psalm if the thought of his grace here and his glory there in other words the grace that he gives for today and the glory of eternity the thought of his grace here and his glory there don't light your fire then your wood must be wet.

Isn't that a good way of putting it? If the thought of his grace here and his glory there don't light your fire then your wood must be wet. Contempt complacency they can pour water on the wood of our fire that burns.

Is your wood wet today? As you think of the Lord are you stirred up in your soul to think of his grace for here and now and his glory there that we long to see.

[31:18] May his word not just be familiar to us but may we be familiar more and more with the shepherd it speaks of so that our hearts would be stirred up by these words to find comfort to find grace in time of need but also to find that hope that longs for better that looks to a place of God's dwelling forevermore and to know the shepherd who leads us there.

May his word, may this psalm stir our hearts in that way. Let us pray. Lord our gracious God we thank you for the wonder of these words words that we sing so often words that we are so familiar with and yet words that we need to hear on a daily basis that we need your goodness and mercy day by day here that we need to have that hope that we can look forward to a dwelling place with you forever more and it's all in knowing the shepherd, the good shepherd who came to lay down his life for his sheep.

We pray Lord today for these words to challenge us, to convict us, that we would not be complacent or that we would not have contempt towards him, but that we would have that longing, that desire to know them more and more and to help all who need you in these ways whether it's times of the still waters and the calmness of life rejoicing in you or whether it's going through that valley of the shadow of death, whatever place we find ourselves today may we know the rod and the staff that comfort, that keep, that uphold us day by day.

So Lord be with us, go before us, pardon our sin, in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to conclude by singing to God's praise in Psalm 95.

Sing Psalms version page 126. Psalm 95 We'll sing from verse 1 down to verse 8.

[33:42] O come, let us joyfully sing to the Lord, to the rock of salvation. Let us raise our voice. Let us come before him, expressing our thanks. Let us with loud singing, praise him and rejoice.

We'll sing from verse 1 to verse 8 to God's praise. the tune of St. Daniel. O come, let us joyfully sing to the Lord.

To the rock of salvation, let us raise our voice. Let us come before him, expressing our thanks.

Let us with light singing, praise him and rejoice. The Lord is the great God King over all gods.

The earth's deepest places he holds in his hand. The heights of the mountains belong to the Lord.

[35:09] The oceans are his and he formed the dry land. Come, let us bow humbly and worship the Lord.

Let us kneel before him our make God in prayer. For we!

He is our God. He shepherds and feeds us in his loving care.

Today, if you hear and attend his voice, don't harden your hearts as you did on the way.

In menopause desert you quarreled with me, you quarreled with me, you tested my patience at Massa that day.

[36:32] After the benediction, I'll go to the door to my left. We'll close with the benediction. Now may grace, mercy, and peace from God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rest upon and abide with you all now and forevermore.

Amen. Amen. Amen.