

Bible Reading - Psalm 23

A psalm of David.

1 The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

2

He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

3

he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

4

Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,[a]
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

5

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

6

Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

Footnotes:

a Psalm 23:4 *Or* the valley of the shadow of death

Sermon - Psalm 23

As a child, at church and at junior school, hearing the King James Version of the Bible, I never could understand how, if the Lord was my shepherd, I wouldn't want Him. It seemed a marvellous statement that the Lord was my shepherd, that He was so caring, so why would I not want Him?

Yet my King James Version of the Bible said, *"The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want."*

Later, of course, I learned the importance of punctuation - and that it meant I shall not be in want of *anything good and right*.

(SLIDE 1)

So we come to look at this wonderful Psalm today. This Psalm which has been read by so many Christians at times of fear, or illness, or age or increasing infirmity. It's been read by Ministers to those who are dying in hospital or at home. I certainly often came back to it in pastoral ministry.

(SLIDE 2)

It's a psalm for every stage of life though - not just when times are bad. It's for both groups and individuals.

And verse 1 forms the one main picture in this psalm - the Lord as a personal shepherd to each of us.

2.

The Bible is very good at practical theology. Where it speaks in picture language, time and again those pictures applied to life then - and in many cases, now.

Here, we need to have some picture of a pastoral scene in a very agricultural Israel, *including the shepherd leading the sheep*, his knowledge of the sheep as a flock and as individuals, and his personal care for each sheep. In that, we see a paradigm for the love of God for us. (And, some commentators have seen the love between Heavenly Father and Son Jesus.)

But the picture is not just an ancient one:

(SLIDE 3)

ILLUS - When leading a Holy Land pilgrimage in the early 1990s, I saw a shepherd leading his sheep up a path near to the church which marks the hilly area where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. It was a unique moment for me, as I realised that the strong biblical image I'd known since childhood was still absolutely true today. **The sheep were not driven**

from behind, but led from out in front. And so they followed the shepherd.

(And, of course, that's still a great image for church and business leaders today. Leading from the front.)
PAUSE

(SLIDE 4)

3.

The close, protective pastoral relationship between the Lord and His people is described using this picture of shepherd and sheep frequently in the Bible - from Genesis to Revelation, with special emphasis in The Psalms and throughout the Prophets, and again in the Gospels:

- **We see it here in Psalm 23**

- **Also in Ezekiel 34**, where the Lord is angry with the then leaders of His people Israel. In very harsh condemnatory terms He contrasts His shepherding of Israel with the very poor care by the religious leaders of that day, and says He will step in to rectify things.

- **And we see it especially during the ministry of Jesus** where, in John 10:1-16, He calls Himself the Good Shepherd - *a thoughtful read of that passage would amplify all that I'm wanting to say this morning.* In John 10, the Lord Jesus applies all the principles of a good shepherd to Himself. The passage makes a

number of points, which need careful thought. But they add up to the image of Jesus being the One who knows every individual and cares deeply for every person; cares enough to give His own life.

In this picture, Jesus is showing Himself as the ultimate shepherd, the One who utterly fulfils Psalm 23, but only does that by the huge sacrifice of His own life.

PAUSE

4.

Farmers in 2015 in the UK still care for their sheep.

ILLUS - Do you watch BBC1 on a Sunday evening? Have a look at farmer Adam Henson on "*Countryfile*". More than once he has emphasised the importance of regular checking of all his sheep, especially when ewes are expecting young.

Sheep are important to the farmer because they provide him or her with a return on investment - either as the lamb we eat, or through the wool that we wear. And livestock farmers do care for all their animals.

So, as we read and reflect on God's love and goodness revealed in the shepherd image of Psalm 23, we know that this image still holds good today. Even for a largely non-agricultural people like the UK population.

PAUSE

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Rather like the words of Jesus in John 10, our psalm now goes through the functions of a shepherd and shows how the Lord fulfils them for us.

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It gives us the shepherd's job description.

5.

* Provision - *food and water* v1

* What is called here "stillness of soul" - *security* 2-3

* Guidance in our way - *safety* 3

* Nearness in suffering - *care for each one* 4

* Welcome (ancient style) 5 (from here the picture changes: now we are God's guest - but resident)

* Constancy & presence 6 (—"—")

* Hint of heaven & the eternal 6 (—"—")

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(SLIDE 6)

So from this brief study we can draw three points to take home for the week and apply to ourselves, here they are:

1. The Lord's personal knowledge of us
2. The Lord's personal care and provision for us
3. The Lord's unfailing faithfulness to us - even when we wander

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6.

There is so much here to bring us a joyful reassurance all our lives in every circumstance - but especially at times of worry, fear, loss, illness, and suffering.

If we are committed Christians, then we trust God and rely on Him to be this wonderful shepherd to us.

(SLIDE 7)

Look back over your life so far, and ask "Has this been *my experience* of God in Christ?"

If it has, then I rejoice with you.

- If it hasn't, could that be because you wouldn't be the sheep under God's care?
- Could it be that you were determined to have a mind of your own and wander off into all sorts of danger?

When we are human beings, with minds and wills of our own, it takes faith, trust, and **surrender to be the sheep!**

But the Shepherd is always there, waiting to stretch out His arm, rescue us, and put us on His shoulder.

END

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