

## Psalm 23

### Introduction

Before we take a look at this most known Psalm, it's worth just thinking about the life of the shepherd in those days when David wrote it; it may give us a helpful understanding and a background to those deeper meaningful works of God in our lives.

That God cares for and loves his own can be often thought of in a light and casual way, and so becomes just the norm. But to know of just how great his love is, and lengths to which he has gone proving it and encouraging each of us should help us through life's challenges

As we think of David when he wrote this Psalm, I'm reminded of those drawings I used to see of him sitting under the shade of a tree, playing his harp while the sheep grazed in peace and safety; it looked a good job!

But it would have been a job of loneliness; all day and night on your own; no one to speak to, not even a dog; you can't speak to sheep, but you can a dog! You had to be careful of being injured as you were totally alone and days from help; there were no phones about to ring for help!

There were also dangers from wild animals; we know this from David's account to King Saul, that he'd actually killed a lion, and another time a bear, at close quarters. Also the weather was not always calm; it could change, be wet or cold.

Injured sheep had to be tended and kept in the fold or else they would be dinner for wild animals. Imagine those animals licking their lips as all those lamb chops appeared from nowhere! They'd have been mouth-watering!

The young shepherd boy's Psalm says in just a few verses about the daily care, concern and provision God has for each of his own; this Psalm shouts out of God's great love that covers us in all its fullness. It's a Psalm of blessing to all who read it!

So we come to the first heading - **the shepherd who provides**.

David's first sentence straightaway declares that it's the Lord who is all powerful, and not the young shepherd; he states that he is as a sheep himself, he's weak, vulnerable and open to danger! He in his life needs to be led.

He puts his Lord where he sees him - above, reigning over his life.

If we are to understand anything about God, then we need to see who he is and to see who we are. The Greek philosopher Aristotle once said, "Knowing oneself is the beginning of human wisdom"; I'd say he had a good point. That just like those sheep, men are timid and weak and fragile.

Just look around our world and see the ruin, the death, this virus had wrought. People are scared, governments are reeling, and people's minds are in fear of what's coming next.

David was intelligent enough, wise enough to know his position and that he needed a greater power to guide him and cover him; he knew it's not God who needs us; oh no, it's we who need him!

Men can make loud their boasts of what they can and are going to do, but in the end it's God who determines the outcome. Doesn't it say that he says to the sea, "So far and no further"? Brains and muscles, beauty will all fail; even as I speak we're in that state of decay! So man must look above, not below. David knew this.

He was brave, intelligent and, we're told, good looking, but he knew only too well how those things can be the ruin of a man! Today we look intensely at these fleshly images and still fail to see their futility. These things are just temporary.

The first lesson then is to grasp this truth that God is perfect and untouched by sin; we are flawed being from the day we were conceived, and from that day we took our first breath we would only get worse in our sinful state. That we, like those new born lambs we see if you pass a field with them in, they're skipping around and happy, they need to be protected, they need to be watched over.

It's amazing how fragile sheep are; they can die by being chased because of a thoughtless dog owner. A ewe will simply give up life if she has a dead lamb; that's why they take a lamb from a ewe that has a few lambs, and put the dead lamb's skin like a little jacket on the living lamb, and give that to the ewe; then the mother's happy.

I've heard many other stories of just how frail they are, and they are stories that make you think of how we humans, we're not really a lot different in our frailties.

David says: **I shall not want**. Is he speaking here of want of gold or riches? Many a TV evangelist would say, "Yes, he is; send me \$100 to receive a Scripture verse blessed by me and you'll receive \$1000 in return."

No. This gold can never fill the void that David is speaking of. This want is a spiritual want; it's a God-relationship want; it's a hunger and thirst for God want.

You can keep your riches, because they will perish, along with their owners; what I want, and what we need, is the riches that God gives, that will go far beyond the grave!

What Christian can accuse God of failing him? Who can accuse him of leaving him short in life? God will never withhold those good things from us that he knows we are in need of.

As a boy, I remember in the week we would go to the larder and stare in at empty shelves. Our main meals were at school; only my father had dinner in the evenings; we had sandwiches and home-made tea cakes. You'd stare in the cupboard then shut the door; come back later and open it and there... was nothing! As if a packet of biscuits or crisps might suddenly have appeared!

God's larder isn't like that. The more we go to him, the more he feeds; we **shall never want**.

Shepherds, good shepherds, would know where to take their sheep for good grazing and good streams. They had to have knowledge of the territory. He wanted them to be fed, rested and safe.

We must drive this into our hearts and minds: that God has so much to bless us with, but we must allow him to take us to these new places. Those Christians who own Bibles yet have never fully read them, studies to be had but would sooner be doing other things. We must get up and follow or we're going to simply wither spiritually.

**I shall not want** can only be understood by those who have that knowledge of the giver. A sheep in Bible times would know the voice of its shepherd; if he called it, it would follow. It would know the master's voice, and how can we fully know God's voice if we ignore it in his word?

And there's a question: if the Bible is God's word, if we really believe that, how can we spend 10 minutes in the Bible a day and say that's it? Think about it! Our most treasured possessions are our Bibles, we say, and yet we can be guilty of reading them sparingly.

David wrote this Psalm and many others, and they didn't come on by passing thought or a whim. He wrote out of his walk, his experience with God. In them he rejoices, he cries, he questions God, he

even has his doubts. He wanted God for all he had to give, and we know he failed at times, but what does God say of David? "He's a man after my own heart." He was nothing without God. Let's be a people of like mind, hungry after God's own heart.

We read in verse 3: **He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.** Israel, as tiny a land as it is, small as Wales and 3 miles across at its most narrow point, has temperatures that go from very cold to very hot! And the shepherd who knew his land would know where best to take his sheep for their wellbeing.

He does not lead to a barren dry place He cares for his sheep; he wants them to be fed and watered, protected and rested. He could have cared more about his own interests, but no, he put his flock's wellbeing first. And so I see our Lord Jesus Christ here because isn't he the shepherd of our souls? Here that shepherd of our souls seeks to enrich our lives with himself.

Remember those who ceased to follow him because he spoke of himself as real food and real drink. What fools to have gone, to have left him; what regrets would follow their life.

It is by opening our lives to him that we can hope to move forward in spiritual growth; by understanding things that even former believers in the Old Testament failed to grasp; this is where real food is, this is where real drink is, where rest for the weary is: in Christ alone!

In a world whose troubles pile up month by month, year by year, we hear people all the time saying, "What's coming next?" Troubles abroad, troubles in our land, trouble in our town. That word rest seems a very distant word, and it will just get further away; it's almost endangered now.

Restoring my soul is bringing me back from those things that have worn me down. My energy is back; my mind is back to thinking the positive, not the negative. This gives me a rest in my soul the world can never hope to give!

When God restores, I am refreshed in him and the troubles of life shrink; they don't vanish away, but they're put in perspective.

Jesus' words were so precious when he said: **Come unto me and I will give you rest.** These are golden promises of Scripture. The two go hand in hand: unless God the Holy Spirit brings restoration to a life then how can that life rest? Peace cannot be present.

So we read on and he says: **He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.** This is the most important verse in the whole of this Psalm. Why? Because it speaks of the importance of the name of God. We cannot go to any real depths here, as it's a large subject to discuss; it really stands alone.

What we can say is this: God is jealous about his name; he will not have it used as a curse word, or connected to anything or anyone whose behaviour or speech is sinful. His name is most holy, and throughout Scripture you can find God's anger against those who do those things.

What it's saying to every believer is that, if we bear the name 'Christian', we have a great responsibility in seeing that name is not treated cheaply because of how others see how we live. This really must be taken seriously by every Christian.

His leading us in a righteous path is for this reason, to bring attention and glory to his name; we must always follow him closely on this path - always be sure of sins confessed, keeping short accounts with God if we fall in these areas.

So coming to verse 4, we read: **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.**

I'd like, on this second heading, [the shepherd who protects](#), to read you what the great C. H. Spurgeon once said: "‘though I walk’ - He's not in a panic, but calm; he's walking with his Lord. This place he treads is a place of shadows, and shadows cannot harm. A dog's shadow cannot bite and a sword's shadow cannot cut. It's shadows, and why shadows? There is light above, and it's that light that guides us through! It's through the valley he goes; he's not staying, he's simply passing through."

This is a valley that every one of us must one day pass through, unless Christ returns first. But for those trusting in Christ, we don't go through it alone; from start to finish he escorts us through. For him this valley is one he knows well, because he too had to go through it one time, for us all.

If you're listening this morning and you don't know Jesus as your Saviour, let me ask you - who will accompany you through and beyond death's door when that day finally arrives? Without the details, I knew two people who came to that door, and they knew they were going to have to face it alone; fear of death took a terrible hold of them, and it was a tragic thing what they went through.

Loved ones could not go with them and they were afraid. You know, Christ said: **I'll never leave you - I'll never forsake you.** These aren't empty words, but these are words he could back up. He conquered death; he alone removed its sting! I may have fears of the unknown, I'm sure I will when that day comes, but I know for sure that my hand will be held in his on that day of departure.

That wonderful prophet Isaiah wrote this of Jesus long before he was born in that stable: **He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.**

How true the words of R. C. Sproul, that the name of Jesus should never be on the same page with other religions and their leaders and their gods; it's too precious!

When I read of Jesus' life, his teaching, his sacrifice, I find no other comes near to him, and I gladly entrust my eternal soul into his care, and willingly follow him.

**Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.** Both are important to the shepherd: one used to ward off wild beasts, one to rescue and support. Both speak of power and authority.

The rod can be used in two ways: against the one who threatens the life and wellbeing of the sheep, and it can also be used to bring the sheep from going astray. We are told that God will not hesitate to correct his own, for their good and for the rest of the flock's, because it only takes one sheep to leave the others and you'll find they'll all follow that sheep.

That saying 'like a load of sheep' comes from when people have to follow others, they can't think for themselves. My own father always said it about the fashion world, "They're like a load of sheep", or 'silly as sheep'.

Move away from the path he leads and we move away from his protection; put yourself in vulnerable positions and Satan is waiting to bring your life to ruin. He waits for silly Christians always to make that slip.

God's love will never forsake us, but when he brings us back that will be through painful means. So it's better the staff to guide than the rod to sting!

So I come to my last heading - [the shepherd of promise](#).

Verses 5 and 6 read: **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 for ever.**

The table that our Lord sets before us is not a table of perishable food; there's no sell-by-dates on this table. The food God provides for his people will satisfy us for eternity; it's food this world is never going to taste.

This food satisfies the persecuted Christian, the sick and dying Christian, the Christian whose troubles feel suffocating, and yet this food still satisfies. It cannot be explained in physical comparisons; it's manna from heaven that keeps the believer strengthened in our daily struggles.

"What is this food?" we ask. We're told just what this food is by Jesus himself: once he was sitting on a well and he told a Samaritan woman that he can give water that will quench thirst forever. He tells the crowds on another occasion "I am the bread of life; eat the bread I give and you will never hunger".

He goes into some detail when debating this with the religious leaders; we can listen to him speaking this in John 6:51-59. He says these words: **I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live for ever."** Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

We're not taking on the Roman Catholic idea that Christ's flesh and blood is eaten at the Mass; that's a heresy, it's Christ dying again, a never-ending sacrifice. After some disciples left Jesus, Jesus asked Peter this question "Will you go as well? Peter's reply was, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!"

It's believing in Christ, putting faith in him: this is what satisfies, this is what feeds our empty souls, and it's food that will give us eternal life.

Psalm 34:8 says: **Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!**

Psalm 119:103 confirms the words of Peter: **How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!**

No other, whether religious or otherwise, have such words as Jesus. His words are life, but we are the ones who must feed on them, for to lay them aside will eventually be to our ruin.

For the final verses, 5-6, they speak of the confidence we can have in God when all around us there seems such chaos: when others seek to ruin and get rid of the church, when mounting hatred gathers against true believers, we can enjoy Christ without these things disturbing or stealing our enjoyment, our calm in him. The threats may pour down, but we are told he is our rock and it's in him we take our shelter.

In Bible days, if a man was in mourning he would put dust and ashes on his head, and that sounds an awful situation. But oil poured on the head spoke of a time of happiness and that's what we have here! To the point where the cup, his cup, is overflowing; God's goodness will never run dry; his love has no boundaries; he loves to give his children every blessing.

What a promise to finish on. 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 for ever.**

As we get older in life, we are gradually stripped of our youth, our health, our strength. Life takes its toll, and the old can no longer enjoy those activities they once did. Especially if you were a sports person, it comes harder.

But the words here turn the idea of life running down on its head! Because for the saved, it's actually life running up!

Instead of a negative end, it couldn't be more positive. Goodness and mercy: Spurgeon calls them the twin guardian angels that are always at my back, always at my beck and call. Goodness supplies our needs, and mercy blots out our sin.

So finally, this journey we sheep are on ends where? In God's house, and it's there we shall have our rest forever. Not a thousand or a million years but forever!

This little Psalm takes the saint to high places, and it's from these high places we see the journey we're on; we see where it starts and we see where it finishes. We see the Good Shepherd and his love, his care, his protection. Learn this Psalm; revise it, keep it in your heart and it will prove to be the light you need when dark days come.