

3. Under the Shepherd's Rule

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[0 : 00] Well, let's take our 23rd Psalm again, page 458 in our Visitor's Bibles.

I think originally when I was planning this little series, just very short series of sermons on psalms, I wanted to pick a number of psalms which are little known. And therefore it's perhaps ironic that I should have chosen Psalm 23 for the last in this series, but I do wonder if it's so famous that in a sense it gets overlooked. It must be the world's favourite psalm. There'll be framed versions of this psalm hanging in people's porchways and hallways and up in the kitchen. Some of them done in beautiful calligraphy, others perhaps in needlework, done by somebody's granny a hundred years ago. But I am almost certain that I have never in my life heard a sermon preached on Psalm 23. And as you can imagine, I've heard a few sermons. It may be that we all assume that everybody knows this psalm backwards and therefore understands it profoundly. But I wonder if we really do. So I trust it will be a blessing for us tonight to dig into it. There is a lot here to dig into. In fact, so much that as

I was preparing over the last few days, I realised that each one of its six verses could provide material for a whole sermon. So maybe at some future point we ought to have a series of six sermons on Psalm 23.

Well now let me say a few things to introduce the psalm first. I've had to ask myself the question, why did King David write this psalm? And I think the answer is that he wrote it because he had to express how very good the Lord is and how good it is to belong to him.

Now last week, if you were here, we were looking at Psalm 39, a very different kind of psalm and a very different kind of David writing it. Because in Psalm 39, he had to express his sense of despair and discouragement. But here he is full to bursting with the goodness of the Lord. David was a man who had to say things or burst. There are some people who are strong and silent, who are able to keep their mouth zipped. But David was not born with a mouth zip. He simply couldn't zip his mouth.

[2 : 28] He had to let things out. And I think we can be very grateful that under God, he was like that. And in Psalm 23, David is making a considered thoughtful reflection on what it means to belong to the Lord God of Israel. It is a very happy psalm. In fact, the secrets of human happiness are wrapped up in this psalm. If you're an unhappy person, but are prepared to study this psalm and believe it and then live by it, you will over time become a happy person. That's why your great-grandmother set it out in needlework a hundred years ago and hung it up in the kitchen.

Because she knew that generations of children sitting around the kitchen table would look up at the psalm and gradually over time they would take in its words. And she prayed that some of them at least would discover through it the kind of happiness that human beings were made for. God made us to live a happy life in relationship to him. And this psalm describes with some lovely details what that happy relationship and happy life is like. So we'll take it in six sections a verse at a time. First from verse one. He brings me contentment. Now we'll look at the first half of the verse first because it sets the direction and tone for the whole psalm.

And there's a bit of a surprise here. Look with me at the beginning. The Lord, capital L, capital O, capital R-D. That's the covenant name of the God of Israel. The great I am who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. The Lord is my... Well what would you expect David to say? Often in the psalms he's described as my king or deliverer or rock or fortress or shield or helper. But here he's my shepherd. Now why shepherd? Now if anyone is thinking when the word shepherd comes up, if anyone's thinking kind man, a shepherd, fluffy lambs, gentle man, sweet little bar lambs. Now if anyone's thinking that, kindly take that thought and throw it out into Nelson Mandela Square and leave it there. Because that's not the kind of thing that David had in mind. When David thinks of shepherds, well let me give you a snippet of the way that David understood the shepherd's task. As you know, David himself was brought up to be a shepherd, the son of Jesse. And he looked after

the sheep when he was a young man and a boy. And do you remember when he came down to visit the Israelite army when the Philistines were attacking them? And day after day the great Goliath came out and stood there and challenged the Israelites to send out a champion to fight against him. And King Saul and all his soldiers were terrified. And one day David came down to bring some sandwiches to his brothers, his older brothers who were in the army. And when he saw this Goliath come forward, his blood was stirred. And he offered himself to be the champion who would fight Goliath. So he had to go and present himself and his credentials to King Saul.

And he said this to King Saul about himself. I used to keep sheep for my father. And when there came a lion or a bear and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth.

[5 : 48] And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. That's the shepherd. That's not a namby-pamby shepherd, is it?

How often have you caught a lion by his whiskers and whacked him on the head? You see, the shepherd is fiercely determined to protect the sheep who belong to him. He's a strong man. But the shepherd not only protects his sheep, he rules them. Sheep will stray. If they're not controlled by a fence or a sheepdog or a man, they'll head off.

They'll get lost. It's their nature. So the shepherd's job was to keep them in line, to discipline them. Jesus lamented. I mentioned this in the prayer a moment ago, but he looked out at his contemporaries, at the crowds.

And he was sorry. He was grieved because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. He could see that they needed rule and discipline as well as protection. The shepherd in ancient society was a strong ruler.

Not just the shepherd out in the fields. But I discovered just the other day that the kings of ancient Egypt and ancient Assyria called themselves the shepherds of their people. Egypt and Assyria. They were nothing if not tough rulers.

[7 : 03] So when David says, the Lord is my shepherd, he means the Lord is my ruler as well as my protector. Now our natural tendency is always to want to rule ourselves.

Self-rule, if you like, is our middle name. But David realizes that it's when he submits to the Lord's rule that he is not in want. If the Lord is my shepherd, I'm not in want.

It's when a person rules himself that he becomes discontented and always wanting something else. A famous, very wealthy American was once asked how much money he would need to have in order to be satisfied.

And he replied, a bit more. In other words, never satisfied, never content. But when a person submits gladly to the Lord's rule, he finds that he has all he needs.

The secret of contentment is to submit gladly and fully to the shepherd's rule. That is part of the happy human life. Now second, he gives me rest.

[8 : 14] Verse 2. Let me read the verse. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. Notice how proactive the shepherd is here in verse 2.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. Lie down, he says to me. You're tired. And he leads me beside still waters. It's as though he crooks his finger and beckons to me.

Follow me. This is the place to be. So he doesn't just casually and uncaringly say to the sheep, I suggest you take a walk a mile or so over that hill and you might find a nice spot to rest.

No, he takes the sheep there. He points to the spot. He leads him to the best place to rest. Now you might wonder as you look at verse 2 whether it's more to do with feeding and drinking than with resting.

After all, green pastures in the arid Middle East would be rare and much desired by hungry sheep. And still waters would suggest that thirst can be quenched.

[9 : 15] But while feeding and drinking may perhaps be at the back of David's mind, I think what he's really emphasizing is rest. Just look at the way he puts it. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

Now a sheep lies down to rest, not to eat. Sheep will always graze standing up on their feet, never as they lie down. And in the next phrase, David emphasizes the stillness of the waters.

Now that's not to do really with quenching thirst. That's to do with tranquility and quietness. If you're designing a garden, even if it's a very small garden, you may well want to include some kind of a

water feature, a pond or a waterfall or a little fountain, because instinctively you know that water has a calming effect upon your nerves.

Verse 2 is about the shepherd ensuring that the sheep can be tranquil. Now why does the Lord inspire David to write this verse too?

Because he knows that one of the deepest longings of men and women is for rest. Weariness is one of the consequences of the fall of man. This is why it's so lovely to hear Jesus saying at the end of Matthew chapter 11, Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

[10:34] And when we read those words, our hearts respond with a big yes. Yes, because his words exactly meet our needs. Is there a single individual here tonight, however young and fit and healthy, who doesn't long for rest?

Heaven is described in the Bible as the promised rest. Everybody needs rest. The Cornhill Training Corps students that I deal with in the week, they are amongst the happiest and most energetic people that I've ever met.

But even they need rest, as I know. In fact, I've known Cornhill students fall fast asleep in the middle of the most riveting lecture. But seriously, we do long for rest, don't we?

There's something about us that longs for it, and it's promised to Christians in the world to come.

But verse 2 here in Psalm 23 is surely about rest promised for this life, for those who live under the shepherd's rule.

We're pointed on to eternity in verse 6, but in verse 2 we're in Glasgow in 2009. The Christian is able to enjoy a real sense of restfulness deep inside, even while on the surface of life there may be a lot of activity.

[11:46] On the surface, many Christians are very busy people, running a home, doing a job, rearing a family, looking after other people, serving the cause of the gospel and supporting the church.

And all that activity, of course, is tiring. When you live life like that, you get to the end of the day, you drop into bed and you don't need rocking. But the restfulness deep within is real, and it brings happiness.

And it's there because for the Christian, the most painful and exhausting questions of life, the hardest of life's questions, have been fully answered once we put ourselves under the shepherd's rule.

Questions like this. Are my sins forgiven? Yes, is the answer. Is my conscience clear? Yes.

Because of the cross of Christ, he's taken every sin of mine and dealt with it.

Am I loved? Yes. Do I belong? Yes. Do I know what the purpose of my life is?

[12:50] Yes. The purpose of my life is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever, to love him and delight in him and serve him. Is death to be ultimately feared?

No. Now once those big questions of life have been answered, our souls are filled with peace and rest. We'll be busy people if we're Christians, and we will be troubled at times by traumatic events. But the underlying restfulness of our souls will be secure because our shepherd makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters.

Now thirdly, he rebuilds my inner life. Verse 3, he restores my soul, he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

He restores my soul. And what he means by that is much more than recreation and refreshment. He is refurbishing the very fabric of our inner being.

[13:57] I think the recent restoration of this very building serves as a good illustration of this. This church building, in the last year or so, has not only been outwardly renewed so that it's far cleaner and fresher and brighter and more pleasing to the eye, it has also been restored in its inner parts.

Those who belong to the church, especially the Kirk Session, you'll know all about this. You'll know that there were rafters and beams and girders, especially at the back of the building there, that had become badly rotten and were ready to collapse just a year or two back.

And they've all been taken out and replaced by brand new durable materials. The building is restored in its inner structure as well as in its outer aspect.

Now that's what the shepherd does to the Christian. He rebuilds the inner structure of our being.

Now this doesn't happen overnight. It's a lifetime's work.

But it happens. And it's what he does. He restores my soul. I can't do it with a wash down and a lick of paint, so to speak. But he does it.

[15:04] It's what he does for people. He remakes us. It's his work. He's in the business of restoring souls, of rebuilding people from the inside out. And he tells us in the rest of verse 3 how he goes about this.

He leads us in paths of righteousness, right living, right paths. Now we can't find those paths by ourselves. We haven't the ability. So he leads us in them.

He says, this is the way. Follow me. And we step out after him. We follow in his footsteps. And the more closely we follow him, the more we realize that he is indeed leading us along the right path. And so we learn over time to live as authentic human beings. We learn to follow him as we study the thinking and the behavior of Jesus. And as we study the mind and character of God as he reveals himself throughout the whole Bible.

We learn to live rightly, to walk the right path as we follow his lead. It's the way to be happy. And of course, he does this restoration and training in righteousness for our benefit, for our sake, for the sake of our happiness and usefulness.

[16:17] But you'll see that the verse emphasizes not so much our sake, but for the sake of his name. He does it for his honor and reputation. And that is exactly what happens as he rebuilds the life of individual Christians.

Imagine for a moment a man who is converted to Christ, becomes a Christian, at the age of 20. And then 40 years later, after 40 years of soul restoration and training in righteousness, this man meets another man that he hasn't seen through all that 40 years since they were very young men.

And that second man will be amazed. He'll look at this Christian and he'll say to himself, I remember when this man was a weasel, a brigand, a waster of a young fellow.

But look at him now. Where did he get this wisdom and this maturity and capacity for love and service? If that's the work of God, God must be wonderful.

The restoration of the soul brings praise to God as well as joy to the person who is being restored. So the Lord does this for his name's sake so that other people should take notice and praise him and be glad about him.

[17:32] Then fourth, he walks with me through the gates of death. Verse four, 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. Now this is the last verse in this psalm where the sheep and shepherd metaphor is continued. You'll see if you look onto verses five and six that David reverts there to being a man. But he's still a sheep here in verse four and the Lord is still the shepherd. We know that because the Lord is carrying his rod and staff, which are the shepherd's equipment. Now let me try and point out the logical link between verse two and verse three and verse four.

It's to do with where the shepherd leads the sheep. In verse two, you'll see he leads the sheep besides still waters. In verse three, he's still leading the sheep, but this time in paths of righteousness.

Now is there any suggestion here that he might ever lead the sheep along the wrong path? Might the shepherd ever have to scratch his head and take out his ordnance survey map and having looked at it say to the sheep, I must apologise to you, my friends, what a silly shepherd I've been.

[18:57] I never was much good at geography. I've taken you in the wrong direction. Well, of course not. The shepherd is the all-knowing God. So the shepherd who leads the sheep beside the still waters, who leads the sheep in paths of righteousness, is still leading the sheep into the valley of the shadow of death.

In fact, if the shepherd leads his sheep in right paths, it follows that when he leads that sheep into the valley of the shadow of death, he is leading them in a right path.

Do you see how verses three and four fit together? The one whose unchanging practice is to lead me in right paths has not suddenly lost the plot when he leads me into the valley of the shadow of death.

Now this brings us great comfort and great reassurance. To put this in personal terms, it means that if I were to discover tomorrow that I was suffering from some terminal illness, my first reaction, I guess, would be to think, Lord, isn't this a bit premature?

I mean, I'm only in my fifties. I'd appreciate it, Lord, if I could have at least another twenty years, enough to see my grandchildren growing up and that sort of thing. That would be my reaction. [20 : 15] But then I would look at verse three. He leads me in right paths. And then at verse four. For you are with me. You haven't forsaken me. I may be facing death in the near future, but you're with me and I know that you make no mistakes.

Let me point out one or two other comforting features of verse four. The shepherd in verses two and three appears to be just a few paces up ahead of the sheep. He's leading the flock forward and the flock are following.

But in verse four, he's right alongside. You are with me. It's almost the sense of arm in arm. And did you notice that the he of verses two and three has become the you of verse four?

In verse four, he is so close that David is talking to him. They're walking together. Now you know that when you go out on a country ramble with a few friends, often you're separated from others by a few paces and you can't talk to the ones who are a few paces up ahead.

But the person who is walking alongside you becomes your close companion. Not a he up ahead, but a you that you're conversing with. And then if you stumble, he's so close to you that he can reach out a hand and support you.

[21 : 36] And then notice the rod and the staff of verse four. These are the shepherd's equipment which enable him to do his job properly. The rod was a stout stick, a stout cudgel, like an oversized policeman's truncheon.

And that was used to beat off anything that might come and attack the sheep. And the staff was a long walking stick. The shepherd would use it partly to help him along to walk long distances, but also to control the sheep and keep them in line.

And discipline brings security. Now looking at verse four, let me make a suggestion. If you were to get the flu this winter, you'll know what kind of flu it is if you start grunting.

If you get the flu this winter, if you really get flu, and flu is not a cold, is it? If you get flu, you have to go to bed for two or three days or whatever. You're feeling absolutely awful, aching all over, weak, coughing.

If that happens, why not use that experience as a practice for dying? Friends, I'm serious.

[22 : 49] I'm serious. I've often thought this. Somebody else put it into my mind many years ago. Use it as a practice. It's good for us to practice dying because it's going to happen. Unless we're knocked over by a bus or something and die suddenly in an accident, it will happen.

Let's practice. So as you lie there feeling very awful, say to yourself, this is rather what I'll feel like in the final few weeks and days of my life. Very weak, hardly even able to take a cup of tea.

And then think of verse 4. I'm walking through the valley of the shadow of death, but my shepherd is walking beside me, so close that I can turn and talk to him at any moment.

And because he is with me, the verse says, I need not fear any evil. There's that phrase, I fear no evil. Evil. I might understandably fear the process of dying, but I shan't need to fear any evil.

Evil comes to those who do not belong to the shepherd. Nothing is worse than to die without belonging to the Lord. But those who are in the flock need fear no evil.

[23 : 59] Now isn't there great comfort there? When a person is dying, their loved ones can be with them in the dark valley. Their nearest and dearest will be there helping them and supporting them.

But when the moment comes finally for going through the gates of death, their loved ones can't come too. They have to turn back at that point.

But one remains to accompany the believer through the dark gate. And we shan't enjoy the weakness of those last few days, the collapse of body and mind.

But if we belong to the Lord, we need fear no evil because we can turn to him and say truly, you are with me. And he will be.

This verse four carries the breath of heaven with it. Friends, let's learn it. It will prepare us to take our final journey undaunted. Then fifth from verse five.

[25 : 03] He makes me triumph over my enemies. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

The main thing that gives power or gives an edge to this verse is the presence of David's enemies. Now without the enemies there, this would still be a lovely verse because we all enjoy a festive banquet, especially when somebody else has prepared the tables.

In fact, many of us here tonight would have been here just a few days ago on Wednesday and Thursday evenings when we had our dinners, our church dinners. And it was such a joy to come in here and see all the tables set all over the ground floor here, groaning with good things.

Tomatoes, chilies, hummus, fresh bread, ham, chicken, coriander, meringues, fruit, squirry sauce, delicious drinks that looked like wine but weren't.

It was lovely and it was all the lovelier because somebody else had prepared it. Now in verse 5, look who prepares the table. The wonder is that it's the Lord himself who prepares the banquet.

[26 : 17] So the normal roles are reversed. The master here is waiting upon the servant. I mean we're servants aren't we? We're to serve him. But the glory of it is that he stoops to serve us before we can ever learn to serve him.

And he serves David here lavishly in verse 5. Do you see how David's cup is brimming and running over? I wonder if you've ever been out to dinner and the food is very nice but the helpings are disappointingly small.

Ever get that? You have to get out your microscope to see the potatoes. It's a bit disappointing. And you're perhaps given a delicious glass of drink but it's only about half full and you're not given a second helping. So you go home a little bit frustrated.

Now it's not like that for David. His cup is brimming over. This is generosity from the Lord. And care. Festive care. He anoints David's head with oil.

Now this may sound a slightly odd custom to us. It was our grandfathers who were the Brill Cream Boys wasn't it? And we seem to have lost it ourselves so it's a little bit strange to us but it was the regular thing in ancient Middle Eastern society that when somebody held a banquet servants or slaves would stand around the tables and as each guest sat down to dinner the servant would put olive oil on the hair and the face of the guest to make the face shine.

[27 : 42] A little bit like the way we put coloured paper hats on our heads as we sit round at a Christmas dinner. It's a sign of relaxation and gladness and festivity.

That's the idea of the oil there. So this banquet in verse 5 is a glad, lavish, festive occasion. But it's more than that. Almost certainly it's a feast which is celebrating a military victory.

There are many moments in the Psalms of David when we have to remember that he's writing not as a private individual believer but as the king of Israel, the warrior king. And David was very experienced as a military commander.

He'd won many victories so he would often have led captive enemies back to Jerusalem and would have feasted sometimes in their presence. So I think we're to imagine the defeated enemy commanders sitting if you like at the far side of the hall there being served with maybe a cup of soup and a dry crust or possibly nothing at all while David and his victorious comrades sit at the centre enjoying a wonderful banquet.

Now as I said earlier we drop the sheep and shepherd metaphor after verse 4 and in verse 5 David is picturing himself as a man again as the king of Israel.

[29 : 01] Now for us I think we can take verse 5 as a foretaste of the victory feast of the ultimate king of Israel who is Jesus himself.

His enemies so to speak are snapping at his heels all the time today. The Bible shows us that human life in our world is always a battleground between the forces of the enemy and the gospel of Christ.

But the whole Bible assures us that Jesus is the victor in the end and that all who belong to him will share in his ultimate victory. victory. And part of the celebration and joy of that victory will be knowing that every enemy has been defeated.

Now that's worth celebrating isn't it? It's worth slaughtering a few lambs and bullocks and turkeys and throwing a massive party for to make that kind of celebration. Let's prepare friends to celebrate. In this life of course it's good to be thrifty and self-disciplined over our food and drink. That's worthy, it's right. But let's also prepare to enjoy the banquet which ends all banquets at the end.

[30 : 08] Our faces in this life will sometimes be a bit pale and drawn and haggard looking because we live under real pressures. But let's prepare in the end to smile and sing and loosen our belts and tuck into the banquet.

Verse 5 is there for a reason. A table is being prepared and says David to the Lord, you are preparing it. That's why it's so good. Then 6th, last, he blesses me in this life and in eternity.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Now this is the final happy note in this happy psalm.

David is picturing his life here as a pilgrimage or a journey. There's a sense of movement in the first part of verse 6. David is walking along and goodness and mercy are following him.

See how he's moving? You're not followed by something if you're motionless yourself. So David is on the move and mercy and goodness, the Lord's mercy and the Lord's goodness, are moving after him.

[31 : 17] But they're moving after him at speed. The verb that David uses here is not a verb of plodding along slowly and bringing up the rear like the last person who finally crosses the line at the end of the London marathon.

It's not that sort of thing. This verb means to pursue vigorously. It's the same verb that you find elsewhere in the Psalms to describe how God's judgments pursue and catch up with the wicked. So for David it's God's goodness and mercy or covenant love which are driving him along, pursuing him. Now isn't that remarkable when you think of David's life, when you think of some of the wretchedly difficult and painful episodes that he went through.

When you read his life story in the books of Samuel, you realise what a difficult life David had. There were moments when he despaired, as we saw in Psalm 39 last week, moments when he wished his difficult life might quickly come to an end.

And of course some of David's difficulties were self-inflicted, the result of his own folly. And yet, here in verse 6, we have David's calm assessment of his life as he looks back over it.

[32 : 29] Despite the bad times, the times of pressure, the times of folly and irresponsibility, he knows that God's goodness and steadfast love have been pursuing him all the days of his life.

So even on the worst days, the days of despair and heartbreak, for example the time when Absalom, his son, rebelled against him, even then he was able to say, surely, goodness and mercy, or it might be, only goodness and mercy, shall follow me all my days.

Now that phrase is there for our benefit, and it helps us to interpret our experience of life. Just think for a moment of the toughest episodes in your life.

The episodes that you would gladly not have to go through again. Well, if you're a Christian, you can interpret those episodes through David's eyes, and you can understand what was really happening.

You were being pursued by God's goodness and steadfast love. For the believer, there is no day when the Lord's steadfast love fails us.

[33 : 42] Now the second half of the verse, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. That's the final goal. Remember how the Bible opens with the heartbreaking separation between God and man.

Man driven out of God's presence by his rebellion and God's inevitable punishment of it. But the Bible ends with the reunion of God and his people.

And a verse like this one, coming deep in the heart of the Old Testament, gives us a lovely advance picture of that ultimate reunion. When the covenant is finally fulfilled, when the Lord looks at his people and says to them, I am yours and you are mine and I will dwell with you forever.

The ultimate goal of the gospel is the dwelling together of the Lord and his people in a recreated universe. But it's not just the Lord and his people as a corporate body.

It's the Lord and each individual believer. Do you see how David sets this whole psalm? He does not write, the Lord is the shepherd. He writes, the Lord is my shepherd.

[34 : 53] He does not write, he restores the souls of his people. He writes, he restores my soul. He does not write in verse four that the Lord is with his people in the valley of the shadow of death.

He writes, for you are with me. Now the Lord has great purposes for his people as a great corporate body. But at the heart of being a Christian, it's him and it's me.

And that's why we can be so deeply happy to belong to him. Let us pray together. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Our dear Father, those words in a sense sum up the whole of this wonderful psalm. And we think of the way in which our hearts are able to be deeply contented and at peace and at rest.

Even in the midst of difficulties and even in the face of the valley of the shadow of death at the end. We know that all is well if we belong to you and we have submitted to your shepherd's rule and protection.

[36 : 12] salvation. So we do pray, dear Father, for any who are here tonight who have never submitted yet to his rule and ask that you will graciously help them to come to him.

And for all of us, we pray that you will deepen in our hearts a sense of the joy of belonging to you. And we pray that you will help us gladly, ever more gladly, to follow your lead and to discover the right pathways that you have mapped out for each of us.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.