

Lifelong Shepherd

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[0 : 00] Now, we've come to the fourth of our Psalms, one of the best-known and best-loved of the Psalms, Psalm 23, which you'll find on page 458 in the Bibles.

A Psalm of David. 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. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. 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 forever. Amen.

[1 : 09] This is the word of the Lord. Now let's pray together. Father, in the times in which we live, times of uncertainty, times of change, we thank you for the assurance of this word.

We thank you for the lifelong shepherd who guides us every step of the way and in whose keeping and under whose guidance we are safe.

And we pray, Lord, as we spend some moments together looking at this psalm, that you will indeed richly bless us, that its words, perhaps very familiar, may come to us afresh, that they may speak to us, they may come to us in such a way that we will not only know something of the psalm, but that we will know the shepherd.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. I've only once in my life met a shepherd.

Or, strictly speaking, it wasn't me who met him. It was when I was a boy and my dad was speaking to this old man who turned out to be a shepherd.

[2 : 27] And I remember thinking, oh, this must be a lovely, romantic, easy, comfortable job. Remember my father telling me afterwards, never be a shepherd.

Whatever else you be, never be a shepherd. It's a dirty, unpleasant, hard job. You're out in all weathers, and particularly in winter, or even worse, in early spring, in the harsh winds of March, when you're trying to rescue lambs from dying prematurely.

And also, sheep are awkward, difficult creatures. Well, I never did become a shepherd. Certainly not that kind of shepherd anyway.

But it is an important reminder not to sentimentalize this psalm. This psalm is very familiar. It's very beautiful.

And it's very easy to sentimentalize it. Think of little lambs going out on the April evening when April heirs are abroad, and so on. I'm thinking of it in a kind of romantic, pastoral setting.

[3 : 35] Now, that's not necessarily untrue, but it's robust, this psalm, isn't it? It faces the dark realities. Last week, we looked at Psalm 22.

And in a sense, Psalm 22 is talked about in verse 4, walking through the valley of the shadow of death. So, its comfort is not easy comfort.

It's not a cloud cuckoo land where everything is wonderful. Rather, it's a robust psalm, saying life is hard, life is difficult, but there is a shepherd.

And the picture of the shepherd dominates, although probably that of the companion in verse 4 and the host in verses 5 and 6 are secondary pictures.

But for purposes of looking at the psalm, I want to divide it into two parts. Verses 1 to 4, the shepherd who leads all the way.

[4 : 35] And verses 5 and 6, the host who welcomes us home. So, let's look then, first of all, at verses 1 to 4. The shepherd who leads us all the way.

And first of all, then, the shepherd himself. The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord, the God of the covenant, who has committed to his people by promises that he cannot and will not break. But he is also my shepherd. Your shepherd. Although in some ways he may seem very distant, he's also near. Heard a story of a group of children in Canada whose teacher was teaching them about this.

This was many years ago. You're allowed to teach the Bible in schools. And she told them about the shepherd. And she got them to learn the Lord is my shepherd by clasping the fingers of their hands.

The Lord is my shepherd. Now, sometime later, there were horrific storms in that area. Snow and ice storms.

[5 : 50] And one little boy got lost and wandered away. By the mercy of God, he was found in time before he died of exposure.

But when he was found, the interesting thing was he was clutching the fourth finger of his hand.

Later on, his parents talked to the teacher and asked if he had any idea what this meant.

She said, well, I taught them this. The Lord is my shepherd. This little boy, obviously not knowing very much, but nonetheless grasping that message that in this terrible time, he had a shepherd.

And that's, I think, very important for us to remember as well. Now, of course, this is deeply, deeply rooted in David's own experience. These psalms we're looking at and the one we'll look at in a fortnight's time, Psalm 24, all are psalms of David.

All in different ways reflect his experience. But this one reflects it more than most. First, of course, on the hills of Bethlehem. And as we know, that was no easy task.

[7 : 02] After all, in the famous story of Goliath, he says that he talks about the Lord rescuing him from the lion and the bear and other predators. It was a dangerous job as well as a difficult and back-breaking job.

And then later on, when the Lord called him, read about this in Psalm 78, I took you from the sheepfolds to be shepherd of my people. From looking after that little flock of sheep to looking after God's people.

So, the shepherd himself is the Lord. Now, there is certainly the idea of tenderness in this. Isaiah says in chapter 40, The Lord will tend his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in his arms.

This shepherd really cares. But there's also a sense of power. It's very interesting. The world in which David lived, the Pharaohs, the kings of Assyria, kings of Babylon, would call themselves shepherds of their people.

Now, there's not a lot of tenderness in that. What they meant, essentially, was they were the boss. And their word was law. But there is the sense of power as well as the sense of tenderness.

[8 : 14] And we need both, of course. No much point in a tender shepherd who doesn't have the strength to keep us, who doesn't have the strength to lead us, who can't actually bring us safely home.

So, there is this sense. And the first time it's used in the Bible is by Jacob. Jacob, in Genesis 48, The God who has been my shepherd all my life long, till this day.

That's why I've called this talk, lifelong shepherd. Jacob, as he looks back over his checkered, difficult, varied career, looks at the God who has been his shepherd.

And, of course, Jesus himself says, I am the good shepherd, which, among other things, is a claim to be equal with God. Because any Jew that would hear these words, I am the shepherd, I am the good shepherd, would instantly realize what was being referred to, would instantly remember that throughout the Old Testament it is God himself, who is shepherd.

And Jesus says, the true shepherd does two things. He feeds the sheep, but he also fights the wolf, just as David had done, just as he used to do himself, just as he did himself.

[9 : 23] You see, it's any hired shepherd will feed the sheep, if the pay is good enough, but he certainly won't fight the wolf. So the shepherd himself, shepherd of power, shepherd of tenderness.

And secondly, his care is comprehensive over the whole of life. There's his outward care. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside the still waters.

The green pastures and still waters, places of rest, places of refreshment. And then the inner guidance, he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

He is concerned both about our outward lives and our inner lives. And there's also the background here of the Exodus.

This is what happened to God's people in the great event of their history when they were led to the promised land. Psalm 77 talks about God, you led your people like a flock, leads them through the desert, and indeed he prepares a table in the desert as he sends manna to them.

[10:35] So the shepherd himself, powerful and tender, his care, every part of us, our bodies, our minds, our emotions, good times and bad times, and the third thing is he leads through the dark valley.

Verse 4, the valley of the shadow of death. And of course, this is ultimately the point at which the gospel stands or falls. Does the gospel have anything to say about the dark valley?

It's easy enough. It's easy enough to rejoice. It's easy enough to feel upbeat when we're in the green pastures and the still waters. What about the dark valley?

Now, this is wider than death. It does, of course, mean death, but also these harsh experiences in life which have something of death in them. Depression, serious illness, bereavement, those kind of experiences which rob the sky of its light, which rob life of its joy, and make us wonder if there is any way ahead.

And you'll notice as well, he changes to you. You are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. The shepherd is beside the psalmist.

[12:00] Now, as we saw in Psalm 22 last week, one day the shepherd himself went through that dark valley, that valley of suffering and death, and because of that is able to accompany us as we go through that valley.

Your rod and your staff, your cudgel, I suppose, the fence and your staff, discipline, the getting back the straying sheep, the discipline who shakes us.

Now, if the shepherd takes us into the valley, we can be certain of reaching the other side in safety. It doesn't mean the valley is easy. It doesn't mean the experience is pleasant.

It doesn't mean we'll enjoy it in any way at all. But it does mean that we will safely go through the valley to beyond, whether that is an experience in this life or the experience at the end of life.

And, of course, death, as I say, is the ultimate, is the ultimate challenge to the gospel. Can the gospel take us through and beyond death?

[13:06] And the Samus says, yes, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. So, you see, the shepherds care every part of life, the ordinary days, the joyful days, the holidays, the times of rejoicing, but also times of darkness.

Notice he's not saying, I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, shouting and singing. He's not saying that at all. It's an unpleasant, terrifying experience.

He is rejoicing in the fact that the shepherd is with him. Now, secondly, the host who welcomes us home. Now, as I say, the shepherd metaphor continues, but there are two things here.

First of all, we are welcomed at his table. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Now, David himself experienced that.

You can read in 2 Samuel 17 of how, when he was driven into exile by his son Absalom, a man called Barzillai welcomed him into his home, just literally down the road from where Absalom and his army were, fed him, fed his people, and set them on their journey again.

[14:26] In many ways, of course, this does refer to these kind of experiences in our lives, the experiences when the Lord himself provides us with the needed help at a particular time.

You anoint my head with oil. Oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Bible, and oil, of course, David himself had experienced that when he was anointed by Samuel, showing that he was to be the king of Israel.

The oil here is a sign of being specially chosen by God. My cup overflows, a cup of joy, a cup of blessing. Some people want to apply this to the Lord's table, the Lord's supper, and that's not wrong, because in many ways the Lord's supper is food for the road, isn't it?

It's a reminder we're on a journey. It's a reminder that we eat this bread and drink this cup until he comes, and that's true enough. I would want to widen it out. It's all the gracious provision he gives us.

That's why we say thanks before meals, isn't it? Because we recognize that we may have bought the stuff, we may have cooked it, but it is the Lord who has provided it.

[15:43] And remember, the Lord's interested in these things. He's not just interested in what you might call spiritual things. He made us bodily people, and he cares for our bodily needs. I think that's so important to remember and not be super spiritual about it.

But that's the first thing, welcomed at the table. But then, verse 6, welcomed home to stay, welcomed home forever.

See, a guest at the table comes and goes, and that's what verse 5 is about. But verse 6 is surely about permanent residence.

I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Now, the house of the Lord here does not primarily mean the temple, which hadn't yet been built.

It primarily means the future when we live in the home that God has prepared for us. That's what it primarily means.

[16:45] And surely, goodness. Now, we use the word good rather vaguely, don't we? Anything we like is good. It's about as meaningless a word as nice these days.

Whereas, when the Bible uses the word good, it's a very specific sense, and you discover this at the very beginning of the Bible. God saw what he had made, and it was good, or it was very good.

How has it fulfilled the purpose for which it was made? And what David is saying is, the Lord is gradually, is preparing me day after day in the experience of this life until I am ready to live in his house forever.

In other words, he'll finish the job. He's not going to, he's not going to care for me in this life and then abandon me. And mercy is the great covenant word, the steadfast love that the Lord has for his people.

So, this psalm, as I say, is a short psalm, that's remarkably comprehensive. And, in a sense, the green pastures and the still waters are anticipations of that home.

[17:55] Don't, don't make heaven a vague shadowland. We're in the shadowland at the moment. The new creation will be a far richer and deeper world than this.

All the unfulfilled longings, all the desires, I'm not talking about wrong desires, I'm talking about godly desires, he has placed in our hearts. All these will be fulfilled there in the house of the Lord.

And, many people tell us, well, forever simply means length of days. Point is, when that word is used, it's always used of God and of his, of the contrast between God and our mortality.

Our lives are mortal, God's life is eternal. It means he's never going to give up on us. He's not going to give up on us in this life and he is not going to give up on us in the life to come.

So, we have, first of all, we have, we're chosen by the shepherd. We're called by name. Jesus says in John, he calls his own sheep by name and they follow him.

[19:08] Not just a mass of people, individuals, all known and loved by the Lord. He leads us through the experiences of life, sometimes joyful ones, sometimes dreadful ones, and he leads us eventually to the house of the Lord.

And by the way, I think it's very important to realize that when every child of God arrives in the house of God, everyone gets the red carpet treatment.

It's not that some are welcomed with a great deal of fuss and others are ignored. It's that all God's children whom he loves, whom he bought by the blood of his son, these are all welcomed.

And when you stand in the father's house, look around and see some big celebrity or guru, somebody whose name has been flashed all over the evangelical world, ask yourself, what's he doing here?

The answer is the same reason as you. Not because he's a celebrity, but because he is a sheep, because he's loved by the Lord and led through his life and brought home.

[20:22] The Lord is my shepherd, says David. I shall want for nothing. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, thank you for this great psalm, for its power, for its robustness, and yet for its great tenderness.

And help us to trust in that shepherd, trust in him day by day in the good times and in the bad times, in the routine and in the exciting, and believe that one day with all his sheep we will join him in the father's house.

And we thank you for this. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.