

Under The Shepherd's Rule

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to read now in our Bibles, and you will find our reading in the book of Psalms. And we're going to read together Psalm number 23. We're not going to be looking at Acts chapter 11.

Paul Brennan was due to be preaching this evening on that, but he's ill, and Edward has very kindly stepped in, and so we're going to be looking instead at Psalm number 23. I'm not sure of the page number.

Can somebody shout out? 4, 5, 8 if you have a red church Bible. Otherwise, well, it's after Job and before Proverbs, and I hope you can find it.

And here is a Psalm of David, and he says, 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.

[1 : 0 8] 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. And may God bless to us his word. Well, let's turn, friends, to Psalm 23, page 458 in our church Bibles.

Under the Shepherd's Rule. There's a title. Under the Shepherd's Rule. Now, this psalm is probably the best-known psalm in the whole book of psalms.

[2 : 2 2] It's probably the world's favorite psalm. Framed versions of it hang in people's porches and kitchens, some of them done in beautiful calligraphy, others done in needlework by somebody's granny hundreds of years ago.

Now, we don't often hear sermons preached on Psalm 23, and it may be that we all assume that everybody knows the psalm backwards and therefore understands it profoundly.

But I don't think we really do, so I trust it will be a blessing to us this evening to dig into it. There is a lot to dig into. Let me say one or two things first to introduce the psalm.

If we ask the question, why did David write this psalm? I think perhaps there are two answers. First of all is that he wrote this psalm because he simply had to express just how good the Lord is and how good a thing it is to belong to him.

David was the kind of man who simply had to say things or burst. Some people are strong, silent types, aren't they? They can bottle things up, keep their mouths zipped. But David was not born with a mouth zip.

[3 : 2 9] He simply couldn't zip his mouth. He had to let it out. And I think we can be very grateful that he was that kind of a man. But the other thing is that David was, he doesn't simply write as an individual here.

He's not like a modern singer-songwriter who's sitting down and soulfully working out some song to make himself feel better. He is the king of Israel, and therefore he has a sense of great responsibility in helping the people of Israel to understand the Lord and the Lord's ways and to teach the people of Israel how to follow the Lord.

Well, now here in Psalm 23, he is taking 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. Let me say this. If you're unhappy, if you're unhappy, but you're prepared to study this psalm and believe it and live it out, you will, over time, become a happy person.

That's why your great-grandmother sent it out in needlework a hundred years ago and hung it up in the kitchen. She knew that generations of children sitting around the kitchen table would notice it and would become familiar with it.

[4 : 44] And no doubt she prayed that some of them, at least, would drink it in and discover through its words the kind of happiness that human beings were made for. God, after all, made us to live a happy life in relationship to him.

And this psalm describes with some lovely details what that happy relationship is like. Well, we'll take it in six sections, a verse at a time. There are six verses, so one verse to a section.

First of all, verse one, he brings me contentment. We'll look at the first half of the first verse first because it sets the direction and tone for the whole psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Now, there's something of a surprise here. The Lord, that is the name of the covenant God of Israel, the great I Am, who revealed himself to Moses.

The Lord is my... What would you expect him to say? Often in the psalms, he's described as the king or the deliverer or rock. Or fortress or shield or helper.

[5 : 50] But here, he is my shepherd. Why shepherd? What do you think of when you think of shepherd? Do you think a kind, nice man?

Fluffy lambs? A gentle kind of man with sweet little bar lambs that he loves to look after? Well, if that's your thinking, take the thought out and throw it out.

That surely is not what David has in mind. Here is a snippet of David's understanding of what the life of the shepherd and the job of the shepherd is. Do you remember when he was a young boy, a teenager?

He was talking to King Saul just before he went and took the field against Goliath, the great giant of the Philistines. And in a sense, he's giving to Saul, King Saul, his credentials for fighting.

And he says to the king, I used to keep the 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.

[6 : 47] And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Now, that's not a namby-pamby shepherd, is it? How often have you caught a lion by its whiskers and whacked him over the head?

The shepherd is fiercely determined to protect the sheep who belong to him. He's a strong person. But the shepherd not only protects the sheep, he also rules them.

Sheep will stray. And if they're not controlled by a fence or a sheepdog or a man, they will head off. So the shepherd's job was to keep them in line, to discipline them.

When Jesus lamented that so many of his contemporaries were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd, he could see that they needed rule and discipline as well as protection.

And the shepherd in ancient society was a strong ruler. In fact, the kings of Egypt and ancient Assyria called themselves the shepherds of their people and they were nothing if not tough.

[7 : 47] So when David says, the Lord is my shepherd, he means, the Lord is my ruler as well as my protector. Our natural tendency, of course, is to want to rule ourselves.

We are anarchists by nature or we want self-rule. But David realizes that it's when he submits to the Lord's rule that he's not in want. It's when a person rules himself that he becomes discontented and always wanting something else.

Years ago, there was a famous and very wealthy American who was once asked how much money he would need to have in order to be fully satisfied. satisfied. And he replied, a bit more.

In other words, never satisfied, never content. But when a person submits to the Lord's rule, he finds that he has everything that 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. Then secondly, verse 2, he gives me rest. Just notice how proactive the shepherd is in verse 2.

[8 : 59] He makes me lie down in green pastures. He makes me lie down. Lie down. You're tired. And he leads me beside still waters.

Follow me, he says. This is the place to be. He doesn't just casually say to the sheep, take a walk a mile or so over that hill and you might find quite a pleasant spot to rest. No, he takes the sheep there he points out the very spot.

He leads the sheep 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 a hungry sheep. And still waters would suggest that thirst can be quenched.

But while feeding and drinking may be in David's mind here, I think that what he's really emphasizing is rest. Just look at the words. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

[10 : 01] Now, a sheep lies down to rest, not to eat. Sheep always graze on their feet, never as they lie down. And in the next phrase, David emphasizes the stillness of the waters.

That's not to do with quenching thirst. That's surely to do with tranquility and quietness. If you're designing a garden, almost certainly you will include, if you can, a water feature, a little waterfall or a pond or fountain because instinctively you know that water has a calming and therapeutic effect.

Verse 2 is about the shepherd ensuring that the sheep can be tranquil. Now, why does the Lord inspire David to write this verse? Surely because he knows that one of the deepest longings of all men and women is for rest.

Even the most energetic and creative people long for rest. Weariness is one of the consequences of the fall of man. This is why it's so lovely to hear Jesus say in Matthew's gospel, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

And when we hear those words, our hearts respond with a big yes. Because those words exactly meet our needs. Is there a single individual here who doesn't sometimes long for rest?

[11 : 22] In fact, heaven, the new creation, is described in the Bible as the promised rest. Everybody needs rest. I think of our Cornhill Training Corps students.

Many of them are amongst the happiest and most energetic people in Glasgow. But even they need rest. In fact, sometimes I've known Cornhill students fall fast asleep in the middle of the most riveting lecture.

But seriously, we do long for rest and it's promised for Christian people in the world to come. But our verse 2 here in Psalm 23 is surely about a restfulness in this life for those who live under the shepherd's rule.

We're pointed on to eternity in verse 6. But here in verse 2, we're in Glasgow and it's 2019. The Christian is able to enjoy a real restfulness deep inside even when the surface of life is full of activity.

On the surface, a Christian can often be very busy running a home, doing a job, rearing a family, looking after other people, serving the cause of the gospel, and all that kind of activity is tiring.

[12 : 31] At the end of a long 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 raised by human life have been fully answered by the gospel.

That's why we're able to enjoy rest. So let me name one or two of the biggest questions that all of us have to face. Are my sins forgiven? Answer, yes, if I have come to Christ.

Is my conscience clear? Yes, because of the cross, because Jesus has taken not just the minor things that we may have done wrong, but every last sin, including the worst, on the cross.

Am I loved? Yes, indeed, loved by God. Do I belong? Yes, indeed, I belong to the Lord and to the Lord's people. Do I know what the purpose of human life is?

Indeed, I do. It is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever, to love him, to delight in him, to live for him and to serve him. Is death to be ultimately feared?

[13 : 45] No. Once those big questions have been answered for us by the gospel, by the Bible, our souls are filled with peace and rest. We'll be busy, of course we will, and at times we'll be troubled by traumatic events, inevitably, but the underlying restfulness of our souls will be secure because our shepherd makes us lie down in green pastures and he leads us beside still waters.

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

Now, think of that phrase, he restores my soul. What he means by that is much more than simply recreation and refreshment. It's not just a question of recharging the batteries with a week or two's holiday.

He is refurbishing the very fabric of our inner being. Just think of the way that an old building may sometimes be refurbished. Do you know the building down the road which is now the Cornhill building next to our Bath Street Church rooms?

That building, when we took it over four or five years ago, it had been a music shop, McCormick's, full of saxophones and sheet music and stuff. Many of you will have been there, I'm sure. When we took it over, the place was a bit of a wreck and a ruin inside.

[15 : 10] All sorts of girders and bits had to come out because they were rotting away. And the whole thing needed to be thoroughly restored from within before the paintwork and all the sort of fancy bits on the outside came on.

It was a big job to restore it right from within. Now that's what the shepherd does to the Christian. He rebuilds the very inner structure of our being.

Now that doesn't happen overnight. It's a lifetime's work but it does happen. And it's what he does. He's in the business of restoring human beings.

He restores my soul. I can't do it. It's he that does it. I can't restore my soul with a wash down or a lick of paint. But he does it. It's what he does for people. He's in the business of restoring souls.

And he tells us in the rest of verse 3 just how he does it. He restores our souls as he leads us into paths of righteousness. In other words as he teaches us to lead a godly Christian life.

[16 : 15] Now we can't find those right paths simply by ourselves. We haven't the ability. So he leads us in them. He says to us 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 to live as authentic human beings. We learn to follow him as we study the thinking and the behavior of the Lord Jesus. And as we study the mind and character of God in the whole of the Bible we learn to live rightly as we follow his lead and that is the way to be happy.

And of course he does this restoration and training in righteousness. He does it for our sake for the sake of our own security and happiness. But the verse emphasizes that it's done primarily for the sake of his name for the sake of his honor and his reputation.

and that's exactly what happens. Just imagine a man who is converted to Christ at the age of let's say 20 and then imagine this man 40 years later when he's been living and growing as a Christian for 40 years imagine that he meets somebody that he knew back then when he was 20 and that man has not become a Christian.

[17 : 39] As the two of them talk together the second man will be amazed. He will say to himself I remember when this man was a weasel a brigand a waster of a young fellow look at him now where did he get this wisdom and 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 believer. He does it for his name's sake so that other people should take notice of what he does and praise him for it.

Then fourth he walks with me through the gates of death. Look at verse 4 even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.

Why? 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.

If you look at verses 5 and 6 you'll see that David reverts to being a man but he's still a sheep in verse 4 and the Lord is still the shepherd because the Lord is carrying a rod and a staff.

[18 : 52] Now just notice what you might call the logical link or the flow of thought between verse 2 and verse 3 and verse 4. It's to do with where the shepherd leads the sheep or the way the shepherd leads the sheep.

In verse 2 he leads the sheep besides still waters. In verse 3 he's leading the sheep in paths of righteousness. Now is there any suggestion 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 apologize to you my friends what a silly shepherd I've been.

I was never very much good at geography. I've taken you in the wrong direction. Of course not. The shepherd is the all-knowing God. So the shepherd who leads the sheep besides still waters and who leads the sheep in paths of righteousness is still leading the sheep in the valley of the shadow of death.

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

[20 : 02] Do you see how verses three and four fit together? The one whose unchanging practice is to lead us in right pathways has not suddenly lost the plot when he leads me into the valley of the shadow of death.

Now this brings great comfort and great reassurance to us. It means that if I were to discover tomorrow that I was suffering from some terminal illness my first reaction might be to think Lord isn't this a bit premature?

I mean I'm not terribly old yet I'd appreciate at least another 15 years so I could see my grandchildren grow up a little bit 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 and let me point out one or two other comforting features of verse four the shepherd in verses two and three appears to be a few paces up ahead he's leading the flock forward and the flock are following but in verse four he's right alongside because David says you are with me it's almost the sense of arm in arm as we walk together and did you notice that the he of verses two and three the third person pronoun has become the you second person in verse four in verse four he is so close to David that David is talking to him so they're walking together you know how it is when you're out in the country for a country walk with a group of other people often you're separated from others by a few paces and you can't talk to the ones that are five or ten yards in front of you but the person walking alongside you becomes your close companion not a he who is up ahead but a you that you're conversing with and if you stumble or in difficulty he's so close that he will immediately reach out his hand to support you and do you notice the rod and staff there in verse four those are the shepherd's equipment which enable him to do his job properly the rod was apparently a stout cudgel a bit like an oversized policeman's truncheon and that was used to beat off anything which might attack the sheep and the staff would be a long walking stick the shepherd would use it not only to help him to walk long distances but to control the sheep and to keep them in line and of course discipline brings security now let me make a suggestion if you get the flu or something similar to it if you get the flu and you have to go to bed for two or three days you feel awful don't you has anybody had the haven't got to raise a hand but some of you will have had the flu this winter

I had it last winter you feel awful you're aching all over you feel very weak now here's my suggestion why not use that experience next time it happens to you as a practice for dying okay ah you laugh nervously but the fact is that we shall all have to go through that experience unless the Lord Jesus returns in the meantime so as you lie in bed there feeling awful say to yourself this is probably very much what I will feel like in the final few days and weeks of my life very weak hardly able even to lift my head and drink a cup of tea and then think of verse 4 here I'm walking in the valley of the shadow of death but my shepherd is walking beside me so close that I can turn to him and talk to him at any moment and because he is with me I'm not afraid of any evil do you see that you are with me I will fear no evil because you are with me I might understandably be uncomfortable feel uncomfortable about 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 would be worse than to die without belonging to the Lord but those who are in the flock need fear no evil isn't there a great comfort there when a person is dying their loved ones can be with them in the dark valley supporting them and encouraging them but the moment comes finally for going through that little dark gateway and the loved ones can't go through there at the same time they have to turn back at that point but one remains to accompany the believer through the little dark gate we shan't enjoy the weakness and the collapse of body and mind that precedes our final days but if we belong to the Lord we need fear no evil because we can turn to him and say you are with me that's why I'm not afraid and he will be verse 4 it carries the breath of heaven with it let's learn it because it will prepare us to take our final journey undaunted now 5th verse 5 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 now the thing that really gives power to this verse is the presence of David's enemies even without the enemies it would still be a lovely verse because well we all enjoy going to a festive banquet and enjoying the food especially when somebody else has prepared the table now in verse 5 the wonder is that it's the Lord himself who has prepared the festive table so that means that the normal roles are reversed the master is now waiting upon his servant normally it's right to think of ourselves as serving him but the glory of this is that he stoops to serve us before we can ever learn to serve him and he serves

David lavishly here in verse 5 David's cup is running over now just picture that running over I wonder if you've ever been out to dinner and the food is very nice but the helpings are rather small you ever had that experience and perhaps you're given a delicious drink to drink but it's only halfway up the glass and when you've had your pudding you're not offered a second helping it's not like that for David is it his cup is brimming over this is generosity from the Lord and care for the Lord because the Lord himself anoints David's head with oil and that may sound slightly odd to us but it was the regular thing in ancient Middle Eastern society that when somebody held a big dinner a banquet a servant or slave would be there in attendance and as each guest sat down at the table the servant would put oil on the guest's head to make his face and hair shine perhaps it's a little bit like the way we put colored paper hats on our heads at a Christmas party but it was a festive thing it was a sign of relaxation and gladness so the faces of everybody shone with oil so this banquet in verse 5 is a glad lavish festive occasion but it's more than that almost certainly it's a feast that celebrates a military victory now there are many moments in the Psalms of David when we need to remember that he's writing not simply as a private individual but as the king of

[27 : 38] Israel the warrior king because a king's job was to go out to battle and David was very experienced as a military commander he had won many victories and often he would have led enemy captives back to Jerusalem and he would have feasted in their presence so I think we're to imagine the defeated enemy commanders sitting perhaps at the far end of the hall being served soup and a dry roll or even nothing at all while David and his victorious commanders sit at the center enjoying a wonderful banquet 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 and for us I think we can take verse 5 as a foretaste of the great victory feast of the ultimate king of Israel who is the Lord Jesus because his enemies well his enemies at the moment they're snapping at the heels of the Lord's people all the time there's always warfare in this world between the forces of the enemy and the gospel of

Christ but the whole Bible assures us that Jesus Christ is the victor in the end and that all who belong to him will share in his ultimate victory and part of the celebration and joy of that victory will be the knowledge that every enemy has been defeated every last enemy that's worth celebrating isn't it it's worth slaughtering a few lambs and bullocks and turkeys and throwing a massive party for by all means let's be thrifty and self-disciplined over our own food and drink in this life but let's also prepare to enjoy the banquet that will end all banquets our faces may be a little bit pale and drawn in this life because we live under pressure but let's prepare to smile and sing and loosen our belts and tuck into the great banquet in the end verse 5 is here for a reason a table is being prepared and says David to the Lord it is you who are preparing it and that's why it's so good sixth and last he blesses me in this life but also in eternity surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life that's this 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 as a pilgrimage or a journey there's a sense of movement in the first half of the verse David is walking along and goodness and mercy are following him now you're not followed by something if you're not moving forward so David is on the move through life life is a journey for him and mercy and goodness by which of course he means the Lord's mercy and the Lord's goodness they are moving after him all the time but they're moving at some speed the verb that David uses here is not a verb of plodding along slowly and bringing up the rear like the last person to cross the finishing line in the London marathon no 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 God's covenant love which are driving him along now isn't that remarkable when you think of some of the wretchedly difficult episodes of David's actual life when you read his life story in the books of Samuel you realize what a very difficult life he had there were moments when he despaired moments when he wished his difficult life might quickly end and of course some of David's difficulties were self-inflicted they came to him because of his own folly his own sin and yet here in verse 6 we have David's assessment of his life as he looks back over it despite the bad times despite 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 even on the worst days the days of despair and heartbreak even for example the time when his beloved son Absalom rebelled against him he was still able to say as he looked back surely goodness and mercy or it could be only goodness and mercy shall follow me all my days now that phrase is there to help us to interpret our own experience of life just think back over your life whether it's longish or shortish think of the toughest episodes in your life the episodes that you would love not to have had had to go through and would hope not to go through again well if you're a Christian you can interpret those episodes through David's eyes and understand what was really happening namely that you were being pursued by God's goodness and steadfast love because for the believer there is no day when the Lord's steadfast love fails us and finally

I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever the Bible begins think back to early Genesis the Bible begins with the heartbreaking separation of God and man man driven from God's presence because of his rebellion and sin and God's inevitable punishment upon the man and the woman but the Bible ends with the reunion of God and his people and a verse like this one deep in the heart of the Old Testament gives us a lovely advance picture of that ultimate reunion when the covenant finally is 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 now it is that but it's much more it's also the Lord and each individual just look at the way

[34 : 09] David writes this he doesn't write the Lord is the shepherd he writes the Lord is my shepherd he doesn't write he restores the souls of his people true though that is he writes he restores my soul he doesn't write in verse 4 that the Lord is with his people in the valley of the shadow of death he writes for you are with me it's personal isn't it the Lord has great wonderful purposes for his people but at the heart of being a Christian it's him and it's me and that is the ground of our real happiness and security well let's bow our heads and we'll thank him the Lord is my shepherd therefore I shall lack nothing dear God our Father we thank you so much for inspiring

David to write these words what a comfort they've been to so many over many years and they're a comfort to us this evening we thank you so much for them and we pray that for every person here tonight it may be our experience in the days and weeks and years to come that we discover you leading us leading us in paths of righteousness so that your name is honored by our lives and our words our work and our thinking and please write deep in our hearts dear Father the way in which you promise to be with us even in the valley of the shadow of death and promise to pursue us with your goodness and mercy and to bring us eventually to your own house to live there forever so please dear Father write this truth deep into our hearts and give us joy and security as we come to believe it more deeply and we ask it in Jesus name Amen