

Understanding Psalm 23

Last week, when examining “God With Us”, I quoted from **Psalm 23** and this got me thinking how important it is that we grasp what this wonderful psalm means in the context of today’s modern society. The psalm is loved by Jews and Christians alike, speaking as it does of God’s protection and care. Both traditions use the psalm as a hymn. For the Jews, **Psalm 23** is used as a focus for the third meal in the Shabbat, (Sabbath rest). For Christians the psalm is often used at funerals, speaking as it does of God’s protection in the face of death, but this is not necessarily its intended purpose.

Psalm 23 is attributed to King David and is thought to be written towards the end of his life. If, then, we think of the psalm as the work of David’s later years, it may be very touching to see him reminiscing and going over all the stormy years of warfare and rebellion, of crime and sorrow, and finding in every circumstance of life God’s guardian presence and gracious guidance. However, the faith that looks back and says, *‘It was all very good,’* is no less dynamic than that which looks forward and says, *‘Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.’*

There is nothing very difficult to understand in this psalm. The train of thought is clear and obvious. The experiences which it details are common, the emotions it expresses simple and familiar. This is the pearl of all psalms, whose soft and pure radiance delights the eye. The position of this psalm is interesting. It follows Psalm 22, which is the ‘Psalm of the Cross’. There are no green pastures, no still waters mentioned in the twenty-second psalm. It is only after we have read, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* that we come to *“The Lord is my Shepherd.”*

Maybe, we too must experience and know the value of suffering before we are able to know the sweetness of the Good Shepherd’s loving care. There are many people, both believers and unbelievers that are suffering because of the current financial downturn. How about you? Are you anxious for your finances? For many of us this is an area of tremendous concern, but sometimes we slip from concern into anxiety and are possessed with thoughts about the tentativeness of the security of our financial future. Some of you have children in school and you do not know how you’re going to make ends meet as you continue to help them. Others have mortgage problems. But the majority of us are worried primarily about what the future holds.

Therefore, the question we should be asking ourselves is, *“How does God want me to respond to the anxiety in my life?”* Well, like all the great questions of life, Scripture provides an answer. This time it comes from the life of King David. David says, by way of example, in **Psalm 23**, that there is a constructive way to respond to anxiety. He says that we should trust God as the good and faithful Shepherd and rejoice in His grace. Now, it must be said that responding to God in this way will not instantly solve your problems, but God will provide confidence concerning what He is doing in your life. He will convince you, as He did David, that it is He who is directing your life – as He is the One who is in control of all the details. This will lead to greater peace in the knowledge that, *“God works all things together for the good of those who love Him.”* Let’s now look closely at **Psalm 23**.

Like us, David was tempted to fret over his life on many occasions, not the least of which was the time when Saul was seeking his life, which may very well form the background to this psalm. But David overcame sinful worry by trusting and rejoicing in God.

Therefore, **Psalm 23** provides a model for us, an example to be followed throughout our lives as we respond to all the difficulties and troubles that come our way.

The psalm has two basic divisions, each one providing part of the answer to our question about worry. The first four verses focus on God as the faithful and good Shepherd of His people and may be divided into three parts – rest, work and sorrow. It calls us to trust Him completely. The second section made up of the last two verses, focuses our attention on God as a kind and gracious host, preparing a splendid meal for a guest, and results in our rejoicing over His ‘grace’ toward us. Notice that there are two themes mentioned, (i) *Trusting in the Good Shepherd*, and (ii) *Rejoicing in God’s grace*.

Trusting God as the Good and Faithful Shepherd

There are 3 things I want you to see about God as your Shepherd: (a) He provides for you (*this is understood from verses 1-3a*); (b) He guides you (*verse 3b*), and (c) He protects you (*verse 4*).

(a) **God Provides for You**

1. His provision is personal. God is a personal Shepherd. David says the Lord is “my” Shepherd. It’s as

if David were saying that He knew that the God of the universe was 'personal' to Him, and in control, as a good shepherd of his whole life. Do you know that? Do you know Jesus as your personal Shepherd? The result of this, according to David, was the knowledge that he **lacked nothing**. Some versions say, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need."* The Lord has willingly made Himself available to us, and therefore, we lack nothing!

2. His provision is perfect. In verse 2, we see that God's provision is **perfect**. David says that a good shepherd leads his sheep to green pastures and quiet waters. In fact, that is where he makes them lie down (rest)! The green pastures probably refer to the tender young shoots that grow up in the morning and are loved by the wildlife of Palestine. The quiet waters refer to a well-spring with fresh water. The psalmist wants us to understand that this Shepherd wants his sheep to have the **best**, and is sensitive to their needs. David wants us to understand that the Lord does the same for His people. It was David's experience and it ought to be ours. We have a faithful Shepherd who wants to give us only what is excellent. Can you trust Him for that? *"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for all of us, will He not then, along with Him, graciously give us **all things**"* (Romans 8:32).
3. His provision renews and satisfies. The first part of verse 3, that is, *"He restores my soul,"* should be understood first of all on the level of the metaphor of the sheep and a shepherd. Therefore, we could say that the green pastures and quiet waters are for the physical nourishment and energy of the sheep. The shepherd literally **revives** the life of the sheep under his care. God's abundant provision for us accomplishes similar ends. Whether it is physical needs that are met or spiritual, it **revives** or **rebuilds** us. Ultimately it strengthens our trust in God and heightens our spiritual sensitivities toward Him. What's more, it satisfies our longings to receive from His divine hand.

Conclusion. God's provision is always **perfect** and it renews and satisfies us. So why not trust God for what only He can provide?

(b) **God Guides You**

"He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." I want you to notice two things here: Firstly, He guides you in righteous paths, and second, He does it for His name's sake.

1. He guides you in righteous paths. As we go through life God guides us along paths of righteousness. For the sheep, of course, this means right or true paths; paths that are certain to lead to the places of rest and provision talked about in verse 2. But for David, God desired to lead him down paths of uprightness during his kingship and enable him to win great battles in his commission to possess the land promised to the nation. God desires to lead us into greater and greater **righteousness** as well. Therefore, we must confess our sins and permit God, as our faithful shepherd to deal with us. John says that when we confess our sins, God is faithful to forgive and cleanse us.
2. He guides you for His name's sake. The end of verse 3 gives the reason why God was such a faithful Shepherd to David and still is for us today. He does it for His own name's sake. That is, it is for the sake of the glory and reputation of His own name and honour. What kind of reputation would a shepherd in Palestine earn if everyone knew he was careless and irresponsible with his own sheep? Let me ask you another question, what kind of reputation would God earn for Himself if He were careless with those who belong in His charge - His children? God's name is on the line in your life. He wants to show the world that He is **faithful** to provide for all your need and guide you in righteous paths.

So far we have seen that the Lord should be **trusted** as the good Shepherd, especially as One who provides for His own and faithfully guides them as well. However, shepherding in the ancient Near East consisted of more than just providing for and guiding one's sheep. The Shepherd must also **protect** them.

(c) **God Protects You**

David says, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."* The word "death" in this phrase is simply not present in the Hebrew. The phrase translated "shadow of death" is really one Hebrew word – which more accurately means "complete" or "total" darkness. So a more accurate translation would be the *"valley of total darkness..."* Therefore, this phrase most likely refers to deep dark ravines with sharp cliffs, as it was not at all uncommon in Palestine for a shepherd to have to travel through one of these dark ravines where danger was imminent in order to get to another food source. A picture that refers to dark or bitter experiences in life more generally,

rather than death in particular.

Often we travel through what appears to be perilous or dangerous circumstances, However, we need not be overcome with fear for the good shepherd is **with us** and he is able to ward off any danger by his rod and staff. God is powerful enough to **protect** you from any danger. Some of you may be going through some very difficult circumstances, but you need to know that God has not abandoned you. He is not a hired hand - He is the *faithful Shepherd* (John. 10:14). He will never allow permanent separation to come between you and Him. You can trust God to **protect** you from everything He does not desire for your life.

Summary. God is a faithful Shepherd. He provides for us without sparing a single detail. He guides us into a righteous life for the sake of His own reputation. And He **protects** us, not by shielding us from every difficulty (though He may do), but by permitting in our lives only what is beneficial to us according to His good purpose for us.

The question we raised, *“How should I respond to problems and pain in my life?”* is not yet fully answered. The first portion of the psalm encourages us to **trust in God** as the faithful Shepherd, rather than allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed with anxiety. But it doesn't stop there, for David's example also encourages us to **rejoice** in God's grace to us. Let's look at verses 5 and 6.

Rejoicing in God's grace

(a) Because He Spares no Blessing

Verse 5. The theme of protection found in the previous verses now switches to provision once again. The picture is of God as a gracious host, throwing a banquet as it were, sparing no extravagance for the invited guest. David says, *“my cup overflows”* which could either mean that the quality of the drink is absolutely superb or that the host had provided him with abundance. Either way, the tremendous **grace** of God is evident in David's experience here. In fact, the implication in *verse 5* is that this has been David's experience with the Lord up to this point in his life and he is confident such grace and fellowship with God will continue throughout all his days. Note, the theme of abundance relayed through these metaphors is not meant to be only of a spiritual nature, but also of a temporal one as well.

(b) Because it Results in Constant Fellowship with Him

David says, in verse 6, *“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.”* Rather than being pursued by his enemies (e.g. Saul), the goodness and mercy of God will **follow** him all his days, and he knows that he will **dwell** in the house of the Lord for as long as he lives. David envisions the direction his life will take as centred around fellowship and communion with His God. The **grace** of God can accomplish that in our lives as well. Do you realise how gracious God has been to you in Christ? You ought to **rejoice** in God's grace toward you, rather than be overcome with anxiety over any negative circumstances you are facing.

There are many insights that you can take away from this Psalm:

- God desires to guide you in his ways.
- God seeks to comfort you when you are exhausted
- God provides security for you in very dangerous times.
- God allows you to find security in him during these difficult times
- God graciously provides for your needs in abundance
- God sees his relationship with you as one of an “intimate friend”, living together in his house, as part of his family.

A Practical Application. It is good to remember that God is the one who can bring us great comfort in times of danger and great distress. He will reach out to us and leads us to a place in our lives where we can find comfort and be once again **restored** to a place of hope and security. God does not do this out of a cold obligation, but rather, it is his very nature (and desire) to reach out and guide us and comfort us. Every day of our lives!