

Psalms 23:1,2

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Date: 04 June 2017

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[0 : 00] From beginning to end, on mountains and in valleys, through life and death and beyond, God is there, my shepherd.

! If you were on a desert island and you could only pick one passage of scripture to read over and over again, I guess Psalm 23 could be it, couldn't it, for many of us? Maybe Psalm 23 would be it. It's so simple as a psalm, and yet it's so deep, isn't it? The preacher Spurgeon said that what the nightingale is amongst birds, so is this divine song amongst the psalms.

And it's become really familiar to us, hasn't it, as a culture. But perhaps we miss its real value for us in the everyday. It's kind of like a family heirloom that we know we all love, but it's sort of stuck away in the attic for a lot of the time.

And perhaps we don't realise its full value for everyday life. In it, King David draws a line from beginning to end of the life of God's people.

[1 : 25] From the start to the final destination. He sketches out the past and the future of God's people. That takes us beyond death to eternity.

And one thing remains from beginning to end. God is there, my shepherd. God is there, my shepherd. It's a beautiful poem, isn't it, for a beautiful relationship that David has with God in a beautiful life.

As audacious as it sounds, this psalm was written to show you the beautiful life. It was written to show you the happy life.

Over the summer, we're going to take little bites of it. So we've got four evenings in Psalm 23. And I want us to look at the first couple of verses tonight.

Let me read those again for us. A Psalm of David. The journey begins.

[2 : 48] Firstly, with an intimate picture. An intimate picture. See the intimacy and closeness that David senses on the journey of life.

With God. And for Scott, he uses God's first name here, doesn't he? The Lord. That sounds slightly clunky, actually, in our English translations.

It sounds like a title, doesn't it? The Lord. But it's the way that we translate into English. The personal name of God. Yahweh. Known to his people.

The fearful, awesome, yet familiar name of God. Think of the difference. Imagine if I were to call Emma, my wife.

If I were to call her the wife. That's a kind of title, isn't it? I suppose. The wife and I went to church today. It would be kind of true, wouldn't it, to call Emma the wife.

[3 : 50] But Emma is just much more friendly. The more intimate the relationship, the more familiar the name. Some couples have nicknames.

Once I accidentally sent a text message meant for Emma to someone in the church. E is very close to D on your kind of alphabetical address list.

So I'll leave it to you to guess who got the text. But it was highly embarrassing because they found out the nickname. And here is the nickname, if that's not too irreverent.

An intimate name. The Lord. Yahweh. It's the first word of the psalm actually. In the original Hebrew.

This journey actually is all about the Lord. His closeness to David. This life, this journey, is a beautiful life because it starts.

[4 : 55] And actually if you drop your eye down to the end of the psalm, it ends with the Lord. Not with David. This is David's reference point for the beautiful life.

The Lord. Because the Lord is, therefore I am. So often life is full of anxiety, isn't it?

Because we switch those two things around. Because I am, therefore the Lord needs to fit my agenda. But listen to what life's journey sounds like when we remove the Lord from it.

Verse 1. My. I shall be in want. Verse 2. Me. Me. Verse 3.

My soul. Me. Verse 4. I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear. Me.

[6:01] Me. Me. In the presence of my enemies. My head. My cup. Me. All the days of my life.

I will dwell forever. That is not the beautiful life, is it? That is the burdensome life. As Paul Miller, the writer concludes.

Without the intimate presence of the Lord, we are left obsessing over our wants in the valley of the shadow of death. Paralysed by fear in the presence of our enemies.

No wonder, he says, so many are so cynical. Both the Christian and the cynic walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Yet the cynic focuses on the darkness, while the Christian focuses on the Lord.

What's the one constant in all of the Christian life? The one thing that never changes through it all? The Lord.

[7:02] The Lord is my shepherd, he says. Now, if you read the Psalms up until now, David has described God as different things.

As a shield. As a rock. As a fortress. As a king. As a deliverer. But this is the first time, actually, he calls God a shepherd. An intimate picture.

If you know anything about David, he's got a lot of experience in being a shepherd himself, hasn't he? Looking after his father's flock. Fighting off wild animals. Feeding the sheep.

Leading them. And as he writes this Psalm about the relationship he has with God, he thinks about the lifestyle of the shepherds. Eating and sleeping with the sheep.

Close to them. Protecting them. Providing for them. Seeking them out when they were lost. Always thinking in terms of his flock. Going out of his way for their needs.

[8:05] Suffering the elements for them. Defending from danger. And David thinks that is what the intimate Lord is like with me.

It's not just general oversight, is it? But intimate care. He is my shepherd. I shall not want.

He makes me lie down. He leads me. You are with me. It goes on. It isn't kind of one size fits all.

If I can put it like that. The Lord cares for personally each of his people. He loves me. He lives with me. Protects me.

It's amazing how King David admits his weakness here, isn't it? King or not, David needs this. An intimate picture. A recent survey asked therapists in the US, what was the reason that most people came to them for help?

[9:09] According to them, why do thousands of Americans pay money to sit in a room and talk about their lives? It can be a good thing to do.

Stress. Anxiety. Mental health. Possibly. But the top answer was, they come simply to be known.

To be known. It's what unifies us all, isn't it? The need for intimacy. To be known. And David admits here, I'm vulnerable.

I often wander into danger. I go easily astray in life from God. That I need security. I need love. I need protection. I need to be known.

I need the intimate shepherd. And maybe you're here tonight. You don't quite get this. It's really good that you're here.

[10:08] But I wonder if just somewhere there is a hint of mild jealousy as we hear David say this. That the Lord is my shepherd. An intimate picture.

If you look into sort of ancient Near Eastern worship and religion, it's quite interesting what the other nations called their gods. At a similar time as when David was around.

The ancient Near Eastern god Shamash. Do you know what they used to call Shamash? The shepherd god. Marduk. What they used to say about him.

He has provided me with pasture. So the other false gods around. They claim the shepherd thing as well. But that makes David's trust all the more noticeable, doesn't it?

There are others out there who claim to be able to do this. But this is David's statement of faith. I will trust in no other shepherds out there.

[11:12] I'll take a stand here. As much as anything, this beautiful life is a decision. Where it starts with the Lord and it finishes with him. And no one else or nothing else can shepherd me like him.

So I decide to be in his flock. I submit to him alone. An intimate picture. The Lord is my shepherd. Then the journey carries on with an ample provision.

Secondly, an ample provision. The Lord is my contentment. And I shall not want, he says. Two words often sum up life.

If only. If only I had more money. If only we could buy and not rent. If only I could be married. We're naturally inclined towards discontent, aren't we? If only I had a different job. If only I were younger. If only I looked different. And modern advertising, it just plays on that all of the time, doesn't it?

[12:19] It bombards us. It picks up on our natural inclination for discontentment, doesn't it? Someone said that advertising doesn't create products.

It merely creates consumers. We're naturally bent towards discontentment. But David says here, I can be content. It is possible.

Because the Lord is my shepherd. He is my contentment. That's the link here. So he says, I may not possess all that I wish for, but I shall not want.

And those words are a fact of his experience and of life with God. But also a decision to believe that fact, aren't they?

God provides my needs, he says. He takes responsibility for my life. Many of us know that. Just from experience. God has provided for you.

[13:24] He has given you employment and friends and food and clothing. He's provided his word to you. He's given his spirit to you. All that you need for life and godliness.

As his people, he's given. He's given things to you without measure. He's not held anything back. He's given it all. He's given you his son.

I shall not want. And don't forget, David is a man who's faced death threats, hunger, enemies and loneliness. Just read the first few chapters of 1 Samuel.

David is a man who's faced death. He's given a sort of spiritual cloud cuckoo land here, is he? What about life when it's really, really difficult?

What about when the unthinkable happens? could I really say I shall not want yes because the Lord is still my shepherd in charge of the whole of my life he knows what he is doing seeing so much further than I can see and if he is my shepherd whatever situation I'm in that does not mean that he's sort of decided to take a break or a holiday he's still carefully protecting and feeding and disciplining and saving his people Alan Gardner was a missionary to South America he went to Tierra del Fuego but on his way back his ship was marooned and his crew were stranded with no food, no water and no rescue and eventually they died eventually a search crew was sent out and they later found Alan Gardner's ship and they found his journals and in the week before his death he wrote words of his trust of God's care even in the most hostile circumstances just a week before he died his last entry read like this blessed be my heavenly father for the many mercies which I enjoy a comfortable bed no pain or even cravings of hunger though excessively weak scarcely able to turn in my bed but I am by his abounding grace kept in perfect peace refreshed with a sense of my saviour's love and an assurance that all is wisely and mercifully appointed and I pray that I may receive the full blessing which it is doubtless designed to bestow if the Lord is my shepherd when other people say if only

[16:27] David can say I shall not want it's a fact but it's also a decision isn't it I shall not want it's a decision it is a refusal to dwell on the things that he lacks or he thinks he lacks and often in our services here we open with Psalm 95 don't we and maybe just flick there actually page 499 and Psalm 95 is a call to worship Psalm if you look at verse 1 oh come let us sing to the Lord let's make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation why worship God?

well the answer is in verse 7 for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand worship coming to worship God is an exercise in responding to the Lord's provision for his generosity for his salvation we worship you Lord Yahweh because you provide and the Lord commands us worship me because I am doing this in your life and so David makes a decision here he says I will worship I shall not want I refuse to grab at everything that I can get in life because the Lord is my shepherd the more we ask from God the less grabby we get I shall not want I refuse the grab G.K. Chesterton said that there are two ways of having enough in life one is to accumulate more and more and the second is to desire less and as David writes like this rather than being a selfish prayer actually it becomes the antidote to self-obsession doesn't it because if the Lord is really my shepherd personally then it frees me up to stop thinking so much about myself to think

about others it is an intimate picture with ample provision and then last of all a peaceful rest verse 2 he makes me lie down in green pastures he leads me beside still waters the picture of verse 2 is just essential shepherding isn't it part of the shepherd's role feeding watering it would be the focus of the day's work everything would lead to that point it's just a bread and butter of shepherding he gives his people their daily bread but I want to say there's a slant here on the way that David talks about this

I don't know if you're a foodie kind of person some people just say don't they I'm not really into food it's just functional you know it just fills a hole I don't think I'm like that there is a sense here in verse 2 that this feeding is not just functional it is restful just notice how he describes it the good shepherd makes me lie down in green pastures I found out you know sheep apparently don't eat lying down have you ever seen a sheep eating lying down they don't apparently they eat stood up there is a sense here that rest is on the shepherd's agenda it is not just functional but restful feeding he leads me beside still waters it is a picture of tranquility isn't it where danger and pressure are far away it's a scene of peacefulness and the cares of life are dealt with and taken away and suppressed he is a shepherd who brings rest and that is a big theme in the whole of the bible the new creation that we look forward to is described in the bible as the promised rest and the lord the shepherd knows where we need to go to get this rest and what we need to do in order to get it just notice how direct he is he makes me lie down he leads me he says to me listen you are weary in life you go down there you lie down there

I am making you do it I am making you rest he's not just casually suggesting that we might want to you know go down here and have a rest try living in that way you might find that works for you that's kind of the world's way isn't it do what seems best to you but he says no here is the spot this is where you need to be these are the passages you need to eat in I know where you can rest I put my law together so that you can rest it is not to constrict your life but to free your life the sabbath day my words my ordinances the lord's supper preaching we call them the means of grace receiving rest from god will seldom come when we just sort of walk through the passages like we're passing through we must lie there that is what assurance looks like when we stop and when we enjoy the means of grace even when all of life is full of activity children jobs and all of the rest of it this rest comes because life's most exhausting painful questions are answered in his pastures they are answered at his table are my sins is my shame dealt with yes am i loved yes do i know the purpose of my life yes is death ultimately to be feared no for some those big questions have not yet been answered and they haunt them deep inside they have no god and no hope and no shepherd in the world but that's why the christian soul should be filled with rest the lord is my shepherd my contentment my rest christopher hitchens said that everything about christianity is contained within the pathetic image of the flock i guess he meant that as a slight on christians but actually he's right isn't he the image of the flock is pathetic we are like sheep in so many ways but when we see the might and power and wisdom of the lord and we realise that he is the shepherd of this flock then actually i'm more than happy to be in it i don't know if you've ever thought about the ordering of the psalms psalm 23 is just wonderfully confident isn't it there is joy even in the darkest times of life it is the beautiful journey of god's people but it comes in great contrast to the previous psalm look at our opening line the lord is my shepherd so confident flick back to psalm 22 the opening line there verse 1 my god my god why have you forsaken me those two psalms contrast don't they with one another and there were no still waters no green pastures for the one who spoke psalm 22 upon the cross it's the psalm that the lord jesus quoted as he died on the cross and so when the lord jesus christ appears as john showed us in the passage we read earlier he is the good shepherd and we can say that the lord is our shepherd because he cried those words laying his life down for the sheep and as we think of the woes and the suffering of the shepherd himself on the cross we can enter the joys of his flock in him we find our shepherd our powerful master the one who nourishes us who gives us the answers we need to hear am i forgiven yes am i loved yes have i anything to fear no the lord is my shepherd i shall not want he makes me lie down in green pastures he leads me beside still waters let's pray together