

Today we are beginning a new series - favourite Psalms and we are starting with Psalm 23. It's a good place to start. John Stott calls Psalm 23 "The best known and best loved of all Psalms."

It has inspired several hymns. The three most popular are probably

1. The one which is usually sung to the tune Crimond. Its popularity grew when, over 70 years ago, it was sung at the wedding of the Queen and Prince Philip.
2. More recently - in 1995 - Stuart Townend wrote the hymn which we have sung this morning
3. And in between these two Henry Baker wrote that hymn with Yoda like first line (Star War fans will know what I mean) It starts - "The king of love my shepherd is."

I don't know about you, but I love all three of those hymns and it would be difficult to choose a favourite. They are greatly loved hymns, based on this greatly loved Psalm.

Let's have a look at Psalm 23.

I'm going to look at this Psalm verse by verse. It's not something I usually do but it seems a good way of looking at this Psalm- first because it only has 6 verses and - second each verse deals with a fresh topic.

David starts by saying "The Lord's my shepherd". In fact he says "YAHWEH is my shepherd". I think that it's a shame that so many of our bible translations translate "YAHWEH" as "the LORD". I usually call my wife, "Susan" - not just "the

1

wife"- and I think that it is good to call God by the name that he has given us and the name that is used in the Hebrew texts.

So David says, "Yahweh is my Shepherd"

Of course, David had been a shepherd so we might not be surprised that he uses this imagery. But, you know, shepherd imagery was often used for gods and kings in ancient eastern cultures.

So this idea did not originate with David; he will have been well aware that this imagery was already used for false gods. It may well be that David is not just saying, "YAHWEH is my shepherd" but rather "**YAHWEH** is *my* shepherd". So he is declaring his faith in the one true God and rejecting the claims of all others.

Having made this declaration David proclaims that, because of it, "I'll not want."

When I shop at Waitrose I am sometimes asked at checkout, "Have you got everything that you need?" and I think, "Well, it's nice of you to ask but I don't think that Waitrose will *ever* be able to supply me with *everything* that I need." However, we are able to look to Yahweh to supply *all* our needs. As Paul wrote to the Romans, [Rom 8:32](#) "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?"

The Psalm continues in v2, "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters."

Lying in green pastures and being led by still waters should pretty much be the daily routine for a sheep whose got a good shepherd.

So this part of the Psalm speaks of God's provision to us in our ordinary day-to-day life. We can sometimes lose sight of this and fail to appreciate God's goodness to us.

Remember Paul wrote to the Philippians, "I have learned to be content in all circumstances." Php 4:11-12 but sometimes we can be so grumbly it's as if we've learned to be *discontent* in all circumstances.

When we are in green pastures by still waters let us remember to be grateful and to give thanks to God.

Verse 3 starts with, "He restores my soul". What does this restoration mean?

It can mean that he lifts us up when we become ragged and weary. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up." (Gal6:9)

But sometimes we do grow weary. Sometimes we do feel like giving up. That's when we need to turn to Jesus to restore our soul.

The old hymn puts it like this,

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in His wonderful face,  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,  
In the light of His glory and grace.

So that's one way in which our shepherd restores our soul. But there is another way, perhaps more relevant to this Psalm given that verse 3 continues with "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake."

The basic word translated as "restore" indicates "to *turn back*" (transitively or intransitively, literally or figuratively) (Strongs ref H7725). Hosea uses it in the same way when YAHWEH promises, "I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has *turned* from them." Hos(14:4).

Sin damages the soul but the good shepherd, in his grace and mercy, turns us back to himself and restores our soul back into relationship with him.

The hymn, "the King of Love my shepherd is", describes this restoration in the verse,

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,  
But yet in love He sought me,  
And on His shoulder gently laid,  
And home rejoicing brought me.

Isn't it a blessing that God doesn't abandon us to our sin but, over and over, he turns us around and restores us in our relationship with him?

So he restores our soul when he re-energises our flagging spirits and he restores our soul when he brings us to repentance and forgiveness. It's really two sides of the same coin.

We've seen that verse 3 is completed with, "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake."

Stephen Motyer once described living life without the gospel to be like living in a maze. He said, “You know that it makes sense and there’s order and arrangement, and reason all around you, because it’s obvious – but you’re still lost. You can find only dead ends. Then the gospel comes and you begin to learn the map of the maze.”

I think that’s a good explanation of “He leads me in right paths” David wrote this Psalm to YAHWEH but it applies equally to Jesus. Jesus claimed the mantle of Psalm 23 when he told his disciples, “I am the Good Shepherd” as we have heard in our second reading this morning. (John 10).

There are many other religions and philosophies which offer to shepherd and guide us through the maze of life but only Jesus is the Good Shepherd; only Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Only YAHWEH, through Christ by the Holy Spirit is able to guide our ways in righteousness. And it’s for his name’s sake. It’s nothing that we merit - it’s all down to his heart and his nature.

Not all of our life will be spent in green pastures by still waters and verse 4 says, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff--they comfort me.”

In some translations this is rendered, “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” And this has made it a favourite Psalm for funerals.

“Darkest valley” is probably better but we do know that we are assured of the Lord’s presence at our time of death. 3

One of my favourite hymns has lines which sum this up for me:  
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life,  
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

Although “darkest valley” may include approaching death it also refers to many other dark times that we may have to go through. In his own translation of the Psalms, Alec Motyer rendered this verse as, “Even when I am walking in the valley of deadly shadows, I do not fear evil.”

The Christian Gospel is not a Prosperity Gospel. It’s not all green pastures and still waters. At times we will find ourselves in the valley of deadly shadows. It’s one of the paths of righteousness. It is then that we can know the comfort of his rod and staff – his guidance and his protection. Whether it’s in pastures green or on a dark path we know that our security is not in our circumstances but in our Shepherd.

That hymn I quoted earlier also contains the words:  
“Whatever my lot thou hast taught me to know, it is well, it is well with my soul.”

Notice that David starts the Psalm by talking *about* Yahweh - “**he** makes me lie down, **he** leads me, **he** restores.” But as he considers the darkest valley he moves from talking about YAWEH to talking *to* Yahweh – “**You** are with me, **your** rod, **your** staff.”

It’s more intimate. It is in times of darkness and distress that we *seem* to have a more intimate walk with Christ even though, *actually* he is always close.

Verse 5 abandons the sheep metaphor and, as I understand it, refers to an ancient Hebrew banquet tradition. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil.” When important people held a banquet, they would invite the people they wanted to endorse. The anointing of guests with oil confirmed the affirmation of the guest. The banquets were held outside, or in the public eye, so that others could see who was at the feast and know that those people had been endorsed by the one holding the feast.

David had enemies but Yahweh affirmed David in the presence of these enemies. So much so that David says, “my cup overflows.” - a reference to the spiritual blessings that we receive when the Lord is our shepherd.

If we’re a Christian then we have enemies. These may be or may not be personal acquaintances - certainly we live in a culture that often opposes Christian values. In many parts of the world the threat from cultural opposition may be a threat to life, livelihood or freedom. But, for all Christians, Yahweh affirms us by preparing a table before us in the presence of our enemies. No wonder David continues in verse 6 with “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

The translation in our church bible concludes the Psalm with, “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long” but a better rendering, and one favoured by most translations is “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

forever.” (Lit. “For prolongation of days”).

The Old Testament teaches about eternal life without giving much detail (eg Daniel 12:2; Job 14:1-15; Job 19:25-27; Psalm 71:20; Isaiah 26:19; Ezekial 37:12-14)

The New Testament gives fuller teaching and we know that we can have eternal life because Jesus, the good shepherd, has laid down his life for his sheep.

David finishes the Psalm with, “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” And Jesus confirmed this when he said, “In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” (Joh 14:2-3)

Can you say Yahweh is my shepherd? If you can then this Psalm, and all its blessings, is for you.

Thank you Lord for the truth of your word and the skill that you have gave to David to present these truths so beautifully in this Psalm. Amen