

Psalm 23

Introduction

A shepherd was looking after his sheep one day at the side of a deserted road when, suddenly, a brand new Porsche screeched to a halt. The driver, who was dressed from head to toe in designer gear, got out & asked:

‘If I can tell you exactly how many sheep you have, will you let me have one of them?’
The shepherd looked first at the young man & then at his large flock of sheep; ‘It’s a deal,’ he replied.

The young man connected up his laptop to his mobile phone, scanned the ground using his GPS, opened a range of Excel spreadsheets filled with logarithms & pivot tables, then printed out a 150 page report on his high-speed portable printer.

‘You have exactly 1586 sheep’, he declared confidently.

‘Amazing’, said the shepherd, ‘you’re absolutely right; you can have your sheep’.

The young man chose an animal & put it on the back seat of his Porsche. Just as he was about to drive off, the shepherd asked him, ‘If I guess your profession, will you return my animal to me?’

‘Sure, why not?’

‘You’re an IT consultant’, said the shepherd.

‘Amazing’, said the young man, ‘however did you know?’

‘Easy’, said the shepherd. ‘First, you came here without being called; second, you charged me a fee to tell me what I already knew; and third, you don’t know anything about my business Now, can I please have my dog back?’

Do we have any shepherds in church this morning? Or anyone who knows a shepherd? For most (probably all) of us, shepherds are not part of our everyday experience & we probably have a rather outdated understanding of the nature of their work in 2009: A few years ago, I was walking in thick mist in the mountains of the Lake District with one of my sons. All was peaceful till we turned a corner in the fold of the mountainside & the air was filled with the sound of motors, shouts & the bleating of sheep. A team of shepherds was driving the sheep down the hillside using several quad bikes & without a sheep dog in sight. It was certainly nothing like *One Man & His Dog*.

But even though the work of a Bible shepherd seems very remote even in rural parts of Britain today, it’s important to understand it because it is a favourite figure of speech in the Bible, used nearly 500 times.

Psalm 23 is a popular passage at funerals because its image of God as our shepherd is cuddly & comforting. But we need to realise that, like the rest of David’s psalms, it was written out of the far from cuddly & comforting reality of his very varied life:

- ✠ He knew what it was to be a lowly servant, because (as a boy) he began his working life as a real-life shepherd; at this stage in his life, he was overlooked in favour of his older, stronger brothers.
- ✠ He knew what it was to be a hunted man when King Saul became jealous of him & he had to hide in caves to avoid death at the hands of Saul’s soldiers.
- ✠ He knew what it was to be at the top of the social ladder, because he in turn became king.

- ‡ He knew what sin was all about, having committed both murder & adultery.
- ‡ He knew what family heartache was all about, because his children warred among themselves & some even raped & killed each other.
- ‡ And he knew what it was to have his heart broken, because his son Absalom turned against him, humiliated him & led a rebellion against him.

Indeed, this was probably the time in his life when Psalm 23 was written, when he was living in exile & running for his life from his own son, who wanted to take his throne.

So this psalm is of no relevance to you if

- ‡ You can control your moods.
- ‡ You are at peace with everyone.
- ‡ You have no fears.
- ‡ You need no forgiveness.

..... because David wrote it as completely the opposite kind of person, as a way of expressing his personal experience of God.

So, how did he express this experience?

Have a look at this description:

THE ANATOMICAL JUXTAPOSITION OF TWO ORBICULARIS ORIS MUSCLES IN A STATE OF CONTRACTION

What is it talking about? (CAREFUL!) It's a kiss - though it's not one you would be likely to find in a Mills & Boon publication..

Now, David could (if he had had the theological language) have described his experience of God in similarly cold language. Instead, he uses the equivalent of the kind of language which a lover (as opposed to a scientist) might use to describe a kiss. He begins:

v1: The Lord is my Shepherd

Now, straight away, the cuddly, comforting message is coming undone because, if the Lord is a shepherd, then His followers are sheep - & that is no compliment, for sheep are incapable of looking after themselves:

- ‡ They will ruin a pasture by stripping it of grass unless the shepherd makes them move on.
- ‡ They can see 320 degrees around them without moving their head (so they need *extremely* wide screen TVs) but are very short-sighted & can be easily panicked, even by the sudden movement of a rabbit.
- ‡ They can't see in the dark & even lose their footing in dark shadows.
- ‡ They have little means of defence - no talons or claws, no speed, no illisiveness, no keen sense of smell or hearing, no great strength or ferocity or growl - so they can only protect themselves by running.
- ‡ They are dirty - they have no means of cleaning themselves. Other animals lick scrape or roll themselves in the grass in order to get clean. Not sheep: they will carry parasites & remain filthy unless the shepherd cleans them.
- ‡ They have no homing instinct (unlike a dog or cat) so, if lost, their only hope is in the shepherd finding them.

The uncomfortable message (to the 21st century western mind) of v1 is that we are as dependent on God as the sheep is on the shepherd.

But:

v1: I Shall not be in Want

Listen to this poem by Jason Lehman:

*It was spring. But it was summer I wanted - the warm days & the great outdoors.
It was summer. But it was autumn I wanted. - the colourful leaves & the cool dry air.
It was autumn. But it was winter I wanted - the beautiful snow & the joy of Christmas.
It was winter. But it was spring I wanted - the warmth & the blossoming of nature.
I was a child. But it was adulthood I wanted - the freedom & the respect.
I was 20. But it was 30 I wanted - to be mature & sophisticated.
I was middle-aged. But it was 20 I wanted. - the youth & the free spirit.
I was retired. But it was middle-age I wanted - the presence of mind without limitations.
Then my life was over & I never got what I wanted.*

Many people never seem satisfied & almost everyone wants more:

- ✠ A child wants more toys & television time.
- ✠ A teenager wants more freedom & popularity.
- ✠ An adult wants more possessions & leisure time.
- ✠ An elderly person wants more health & more friends.

I enjoy reading about humorous gravestones & I came across this one in memory of a married couple:

*She died for want of things.
He died trying to give them to her.*

By contrast, David had learned what the apostle Paul later expressed like this (in Philippians chapter 4 vv11 & 12):

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need & I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any & every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Notice that it is our *needs* which the Lord supplies, not our desires. A little later in chapter 4 of Philippians (v19), Paul continues:

My God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

When our lads were little, like other children, they forever wanted sweets, toys, ice cream, whatever. Jen & I would explain that, while they might *want* these things, they didn't *need* them. Now, they weren't exactly slow-witted, so, quite soon, the message changed to I *need* some sweets, an ice cream or whatever.

At that stage, they hadn't grasped what one four-year-old girl whom I read about seems to have grasped. She was in a Sunday school class & the teacher asked if anyone of them could recite the whole of the 23rd psalm. The little girl was the youngest of several who put up their hands. A bit sceptical, the teacher invited her to recite the psalm. Taking a deep breath, she announced, '*The Lord is my shepherd; that's all I want*'. And I, for one, think she got to the heart of the psalm.

I wonder which of the youngsters we are more like.

v2: He Makes me Lie Down in Green Pastures

A shepherd in David's day would start his sheep grazing very early in the morning; by mid morning, they would be hot & tired & their stomachs would be full of undigested grass. To drink water might seem natural to us but it would be disastrous at this stage; the shepherd knew that the sheep needed to rest, cool down & digest the grass before they could drink safely.

Just so, God often knows *our* needs better than we do & it's sometimes only with the perspective of time that we can understand what He has been doing.

But the sheep would only lie down if 4 conditions were met:

- 1 They must be full; bear in mind that the land where David wrote this psalm is dry, brown & sun-burned. Green pastures didn't happen by chance. Shepherds had to search hard for green areas or cultivate them themselves.
- 2 They must be unafraid; the least suspicion of danger & they would flee.
- 3 They must be content; they would not settle if insects were bothering them.
- 4 There must be harmony in the flock; they would not settle if there was tension over the butting order in the flock.

So sometimes the shepherd literally had to *make* the sheep lie down in green pastures, especially the pregnant ewes & frolicking lambs. He would fold their legs in such a way that they would become paralysed for a while, so had no choice but to lie down.

Just so, God *sometimes* has to *make* us stop or slow down, maybe through a period of ill health which forces us to reassess our priorities.

v2: He Leads me Beside Still Waters

Sheep are afraid of fast flowing water; they are poor swimmers & get bogged down with their heavy wool. So when a shepherd came to a moving stream, he didn't try to force the sheep to drink; instead, he built a dam & made a pool where they could drink from still water. In John chapter 7 v37, Jesus said:

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me & drink.

In Christ, we can find spiritual refreshment to match that supplied by the still waters provided by the shepherd.

v3: He Restores my Soul

There is an old shepherd's term called a 'cast sheep'. This is a sheep which has turned over on its back & can't right itself. It happens frequently & ,when it does, all the sheep can do is lie on its back kicking frantically in the air. If it's not rescued within a short time, it will die. When the shepherd finds the sheep, he will turn it on its side, rub its legs to restore circulation & lift it to its feet. At first, it will stumble & stagger but then it will walk steadily & surely.

David stumbled badly when he committed adultery with Bathsheba & had her husband killed. But when God's prophet, Nathan, made David face up to his wrongdoing, he repented & received God's forgiveness; his soul was restored.

Richard often speaks of the God of the second chance; David knew this better than most & he reminds us that this is the kind of God we follow.

V3: He Guides me in Paths of Righteousness

In 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', Alice comes to a fork in the road & she asks the Cheshire cat for advice:

'Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from her?'

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the cat.

'I don't much care where,' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go', said the cat.

Jesus, in Matthew chapter 7, also spoke of two roads:

‡ A broad one followed by many which leads to destruction.

‡ And a narrow one followed by just a few which leads to life.

But, unlike the Cheshire cat, He was very clear that it *does* matter which one we choose. There is a stark story from Turkey in 2005 illustrating the consequences of sheep not following the right path: Some 1500 sheep from several flocks were gathered together in one pasture land. The shepherds were having breakfast nearby, but it seems that no-one was actually watching the flock. One sheep wandered off & fell over a nearby cliff to the rocks several feet below. The rest must have figured that the first sheep knew what he was doing, so they all followed him ... to the bottom of the ravine. In a matter of moments, some 400 sheep lay dead & the rest had suffered serious injuries. The total loss was estimated to be around £50,000.

In Isaiah chapter 53 v6 we read:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way.

He then speaks of the suffering servant - a picture of Jesus - saving us from our waywardness.

v4: The Valley of the Shadow of Death

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod & your staff, they comfort me.

In the Spring & for most of the Summer, the flock did not have to move around much because the grass was plentiful. But when Autumn & Winter came, the flock was constantly on the move, often through valleys. These were sometimes referred to as 'the valley of the shadow of death' because they were the haunt of deadly predators. For all of us, there will be valleys in life, times of challenge & difficulty. Some of us will have many, some few. Some of the valleys will be deep, some not so deep. But one valley we must all cross is the valley of the shadow of death. And we cannot walk it with our husband or wife, with our business partner, with friends or with family. We either walk with Christ or we walk alone.

David was in the later stages of his life when he wrote these words; having reflected on his experience of God over the years, he looks to the future with a confidence built on that experience - & we see it in two of the words he uses:

‡ He says we walk *through* the valley; we don't have to stay there. With Christ at our side, through the gloom there is brightness.

‡ He speaks also of the *shadow* of death. Just as the shadow of a dog cannot bite, so the shadow of death cannot harm us if we walk with Christ.

We read in vv 56 & 57 of 1 Corinthians chapter 15:

The sting of death is sin & the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

v5: You Prepare a Table Before Me in the Presence of my Enemies

David's picture language to describe God now moves from a shepherd to a gracious dinner host, as he looks with confidence to his destiny.

Jesus picked up this theme in John's gospel, chapter 14, v2:

In my father's house are many rooms; I am going there to prepare a place for you.

v5: You Anoint my Head with Oil

David probably has in mind the generous dinner host who would go round the table putting expensive & fragrant oil on the guests' foreheads. This would help neutralise body odour & the smells of the field. It's a picture of God's extravagant generosity towards us. And this is seen too in the next phrase:

v5: My Cup Overflows

We live in a generation of the half-empty cup & the content that fills the half cup is fear - fear that we don't have enough, fear that we are not valuable, fear that we will be forgotten when we die. David is declaring that, because he has experienced God at work in his life, he is free from that fear.

He portrays a dinner host pouring the drinks till the cups literally overflowed, this was a sign that the guests could stay as long as they wanted. But when a cup sat empty, the host was hinting that it was time to leave. If God gave us what we deserve, we would be punished for our sin & disobedience. But, supremely, in the death & resurrection of God's only son to save us from our wrongdoing, we see God's extravagant generosity in action on our behalf.

Conclusion

Psalm 23 is a striking testimony of God's dealings with one man & a picture of how He longs to deal with all of us. I wonder how much of it is your experience & mine. Maybe our self-reliance keeps us from sharing David's experience of God; maybe our psalm 23 would read something like this:

I am my own shepherd; I am always in need.

I stumble from shop to shop, from fad to fad, seeking relief but never finding it.

I creep through the valley of the shadow of death & fall apart.

I fear everything from pesticides to power lines & am starting to act like my parents.

I go down to work every morning & am surrounded by my enemies.

I go home & even my goldfish scowls at me.

I anoint my headache with extra-strength Anadin.

My Glenfiddich overflows.

Surely misery & misfortune will follow me & I will live in self-doubt all the days of my life.

Or maybe our 21st century lifestyle would make *our* version of psalm 23 something like this:

The clock is my dictator; I shall not rest.

It makes me lie down only when exhausted.

It leads me into deep depression.

It bounds my soul.

It leads me in circles of frenzy, for activities' sake.

Even though I run frantically from task to task, I will never get it all done.

For my targets are with me.

Deadlines & my need for approval, they drive me.

They demand performance from me, beyond the limits of my schedule.

They anoint my head with migraines.

My in-basket overflows.

*Surely fatigue & time pressures shall follow me all the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the bonds of frustration forever.*

As we close, I see three basic lessons in psalm 23:

- ✠ Join the shepherd's flock.
- ✠ Stay close to the shepherd.
- ✠ Follow wherever the shepherd leads.

Then, maybe, we will share David's confidence in God, in saying:

*Surely goodness & love will follow me all the days of my life, & I will dwell in the house
of the Lord forever.*

PREACHED AT THE PARISH CHURCH, AUGUST 2009