

“Christ as the Shepherd (part 2)”

Psalm 23:4-6

Introduction

Let me start with a few words of introduction for those who weren't here last week. Some time ago I read a little book called, “*A shepherd looks at Psalm 23*” by a man called Philip Keller, who used to be a sheep farmer in East Africa, and later in life became a pastor of a church there. So he knows plenty about shepherding sheep and about pastoring people! I found his book gave me so many fresh insights into Psalm 23 that I ended up putting it into two sermons instead of one. The first sermon I gave last Wednesday night when we looked at the first 3 verses of this Psalm under 2 headings: 1. Who is this shepherd? (v.1), and 2. What does he do for us? (vs.2-3).

1. Who is this shepherd? (v.1)

I believe that the Shepherd spoken of in Psalm 23 is the Lord Jesus Christ, because when we come into the New Testament, Jesus says, ‘*I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.*’ (John 10:11,14). Later on because of his resurrection from the dead he is called *the Great Shepherd* (Hebrews 13:20) and then in 1 Peter 5 he is called *the Chief Shepherd* because one day soon He will come again to examine the work of all the under-shepherds of his church – pastors, ministers, elders. He will expose the work of some for the sham that they were, but He will reward the work of others who have served faithfully and preached His Word fearlessly. That’s why I believe Psalm 23 is a Psalm all about Christ as our Shepherd. And it’s because of who He is and what He is like that we can say,

‘The Lord is my shepherd, [and that’s why] I will lack nothing.’

He has promised to meet all our needs - to look after us in every way.

The question each one of us has to answer tonight of course is, whether or not He is our shepherd. I trust we can all say, ‘*The Lord is MY shepherd*’ - My Saviour, my Lord and my friend?

2. What does this shepherd do for us? (vs.2-3)

(i) He feeds us with spiritual food and spiritual drink as we meet with him in his Word and in prayer day by day. (v.2).

(ii) He also picks us up when we get cast down – ‘*he restores my soul*’ (v.3a)

(iii) He also wants to lead us or ‘*guide us in paths of righteousness for his own name’s sake*’ (v.3b). So he wants to lead and guide us throughout our lives here on earth.

We looked at all of that last week. So we’re all up-to-date now. So what about vs.4-6?

Before I look at these last 3 verses with you, I hope that Jesus is your Saviour, Lord and Shepherd? Because if He’s not then this doesn’t apply to you.

And you would be very wrong to take comfort from these words if it wasn’t meant for you. I would then be guilty of giving you ‘false comfort’. That is something The Chief Shepherd would hold me accountable for one day.

But if Jesus is your Saviour then the 3 statements I'm about to make do apply to you, and you can indeed take great comfort from them.

If the Lord really is your Shepherd, then that means that:

3. Jesus will be with you in the Valley (v.4)

(v.4) *“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.*

Did you notice that up until this point in the Psalm it's as if the sheep has been talking to his neighbour over the fence? Telling his unfortunate neighbour who doesn't have a good shepherd that 'the Lord is my shepherd' and of all the wonderful things he does for him as his sheep. The sheep is almost boasting and bragging of the wonderful life that is his because of the shepherd he belongs to. In a sense you could say he is witnessing to his neighbour of the benefits of having the Lord as his shepherd!

So up until this point in the Psalm the sheep has been on the home farm, talking through the fence to his neighbour, whose lot in life was a lot worse than his own.

But from v.4 the mid point of the Psalm, and the mid point of the sheep's year, the Shepherd begins to lead his sheep out from the home farm and up onto the higher ground to the summer grazing on the top of the mountain. The language becomes much more intimate here, because the sheep is now talking to the shepherd. He is growing in his relationship with the good shepherd. He's going on to higher ground.

To get to the upland grazing for the summer they have to go up through the valley, or the mountain pass, but when they get to the top of the **Valley** they arrive out onto the **Table** top of the mountain range and there they stay for the summer. (v.5)

The final verse depicts the shepherd bringing his sheep **Home**. The sheep looking back contentedly over the months that have passed, knowing that the shepherd has looked after him well and taken care of all of his needs so far, and now that he's back on the home farm, he knows that this same shepherd will look after him just as well **all** the days of his life, and then of course the Psalmist makes the point, that for the Christian, such care from the Good Shepherd is not just for this life, but **forever** more!

So verse 4 tells us that Jesus will be with you in the Valley.

Now most translations call it the 'valley of the shadow of death.' And though it could mean that, it doesn't have to. It doesn't have to refer to death at all.

Sadly, so often when we sing or read the 23rd Psalm we think of a funeral or of death. But this Psalm doesn't have to be kept for funerals!

We would miss so much of its help and comfort if we did that. The NIV footnote has an alternative rendering here: *“Even though I walk **through the darkest valley**, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”* That is a true rendering of the Hebrew word.

Now the darkest valley for you might be the death of a loved one - a bereavement, but there are many other dark valleys in life as well, besides death.

The point here is that *whatever* dark valley you are called to go through in life or in death, Jesus will be right there with you! Jesus will be with you in **the Valley**.

As the shepherd led his sheep out from the home farm at the beginning of the summer, and as he leads his sheep along the right paths, he brings them to a valley. But he does so for a reason. There is a purpose in coming to this valley. This valley is not the end, otherwise it would be the last verse of the Psalm. But as v.4 says, this valley was something to go *through*. Not to stay in, not to get stuck in, but a valley to pass through. Where were they going? The shepherd was taking his sheep on to higher ground for the summer. There wasn't something *terrible* on the other side of the valley, there was something *wonderful*. There was an open table top mountain – that's where they were going - with all its rich pasture and warmth under the summer sun. The shepherd was wanting the best for his sheep – he was taking them to the table top pastures, but in order to get there they had to go through a dark valley.

Sometimes God in His wisdom, in order to give us something better, has to take us through a dark valley. It might be a period of loss in our lives, it might be some fiery trial, it might be an illness or a period of suffering, but it comes into our lives, or we are led into it by our shepherd, because it is for our own ultimate good.

Now the sheep would have been frightened and fearful and nervous as they entered this valley, as we so often are when we come across difficulties in our lives. But the sheep in v.4 said he would fear no evil, even in this dark valley – why? Well he gives us the reason: ***“For you are with me.”*** Because his shepherd was with him.

And who was his shepherd? (v.1) The Lord!

That's why those verses of the Bible are so comforting to us. Jesus said, *“I will never leave you, nor forsake you.”* *“Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the age.”* Or in the OT The Lord said: *“MY Presence will go with you and I will give you rest.”* Just to know that the shepherd is with us brings us great comfort.

But what is it about the shepherd that gives us such comfort? (v.4)

The sheep tells us: *“Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”*

It was because of the two implements that the shepherd carried with him.

A rod and a staff. It took both to comfort the sheep.

The rod was used as a weapon. It was like a club of wood, with one end heavier than the other. And in the East, as soon as a shepherd started his career, he cut a lump of wood out of a hedge and he shaped it until he got it just the way he wanted it. And then he would practice for hours on end using this club. He could throw it with deadly accuracy, spinning through the air like a boomerang to hit any animal or predator that was attempting to worry his sheep. It probably wouldn't kill the animal, but it would

wound his pride enough to send him skulking away in some pain. The only time a shepherd would use this rod on one of his own sheep would be for discipline, if they were becoming unruly within the flock, butting those weaker than itself. But most of the time it was used to ward off enemies of the flock. The rod brought the sheep a sense of comfort, for he knew it was for his own protection.

The staff is more familiar to us. The long thin stick with the head shaped in a crook. Most of the time the staff was used for picking up a sheep by the neck when it fell off the steep mountain path. It brought him back onto the straight and narrow. It was particularly used for the young lambs. But sometimes as they walked along, the shepherd would just give the sheep a gentle nudge in the side with the crooked end of his staff, just to guide it in the right direction. If the sheep needed extra reassurance it might even walk along leaning slightly into the staff end just to know the shepherd was beside him or nearby in case anything did happen or go wrong. And so the rod brought protection and the staff brought guidance and reassurance, and so the sheep was able to make the journey through the dark valley with confidence.

Maybe you are passing through a dark valley experience in your life. As I said it might not be death, but it might be the bereavement of a close family member that you're finding hard to come to terms with. It might be a prolonged illness, or some financial worry or difficulty. The important thing to remember is that whatever this valley is for you, it is not the end. Soon you will be out the other end, out into the warmth of the sunshine, out onto table land.

But even if this valley for you does turn out to be death, and you are a Christian, then that too is not the end, you will be out the other side into the most beautiful pastures imaginable – into heaven itself! But any difficult valley you are passing through is designed to draw you closer to the shepherd, not to drive you further away from him. He knows what he's doing. So let him comfort you. What about v.5?

4. Jesus will look after you at the Table (v.5)

(v.5) *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

As the shepherd and his sheep emerge out of the dark valley they find that it opens out on to a beautiful sun-drenched table top pasture-land. It's a mountain plateau. The most famous mountain plateau is probably Table Mountain in South Africa near Cape Town. It has steep sides and valleys leading up to a completely flat top area known as 'the Table.' Mountains like that provide great summer pastures for the sheep. That's why the shepherd brought his sheep up the dark valley. He wanted something better for them. (cf The Glens of Antrim going up onto Antrim Plateau). Some weeks earlier he would probably have come up here on his own on a scouting mission - to check that everything was OK for the arrival of the sheep. He would clear the whole area of any weeds or poisonous plants that could harm the sheep if eaten.

He would make sure there were no wild animals in the area, particularly snakes that could harm his sheep. So that's what it means when it says, "*you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*" The enemies were the poisonous plants and dangerous snakes and wild animals that could kill a sheep in a very short space of time. But even here on this table top mountain, the shepherd has provided the best possible pasture for his sheep, even though it might be the most dangerous of places to be. He was still providing for all the needs of his sheep - still looking after them.

Remember this was the summer time. It's warm, it's hot under the sun beating down on the flat mountain pastures, and because of the hot humid days the flies and the pests and the parasites are out in force.

That's why the shepherd ***anoints the heads of his sheep with oil.*** It is usually the sheep's head that is annoyed or affected most by these summer parasites. But not always - It can be so warm and wet in summer that my brother's sheep over in Scotland get really bothered by maggots around their backs and their tails. Each evening he goes out and walks through his flock looking for any signs of them, and when he spots them, he removes the affected sheep from the flock and gets a dose or chemicals to treat the sheep with as soon as possible to kill off the maggots. Well in hot Eastern countries it was usually flies or parasites that attacked the sheep's head and drove it to distraction, so the good shepherds knew to anoint their sheep's heads with oil - a home-made mixture of olive oil and sulphur and other ingredients that just drove such pests away. And so the sheep in Psalm 23 could say, "*My cup runneth over*" "*my cup overflows*". He was amply supplied.

He had everything that he needed. His Good Shepherd had thought of everything. He was being well looked after. What more could he want or ask for? Is that how we feel when the Lord looks after us, and takes care of all our needs, or do we sometimes take it all for granted.

This sheep was well looked after on the home farm, and on the high upland summer pastures on table top mountain, and so as the summer drew to a close he could say, "*my cup overflows.*" But as the first snows of winter began to fall, and the rain began to come in sideways, it was time to come down from the heights and back to home base again for the winter. The cycle of the year was nearly over and so as the sheep and the shepherd made their way home the sheep could say to himself (v.6):

*"Surely goodness and mercy (or goodness and love)
will follow me all the days of my life."*

With a shepherd as good as this one, who has looked after me through all of that, surely having proved him in the past, I can trust him for all that is still to come.

That's what we should be able to do as Christians - praise God for all that is passed in our lives, all that he has brought us through, and then in the light of that, trust him for all that's still to come - whatever it might be, with such a shepherd you can handle it!

And so verse 6 tells us that:

5. Jesus will take us Home forever (v.6)

(v.6) *“Surely goodness and mercy (or goodness and love) will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”*

Someone has likened goodness and mercy to the two sheep-dogs that follow the flock. But that would never have happened in the East. It's only in the West that dogs are used to round up a flock of sheep. And what an amazing job they do. We were able to watch some sheep dog trials on a neighbouring farm to my brother's in Scotland when we were there on holiday. It was amazing how, at just a whistle from the shepherd, the sheep-dog knew exactly what to do to get around the sheep and guide them in the right direction and finally into the little pen, and the gate swung shut – they were Home!

Well whether they represent sheep-dogs or not, we know that the goodness and mercy, or love of God will follow us home – all the days of our life here on earth, yes - but more than that, all the days of the life to come as well. Because we can say something the sheep couldn't say, *“We will dwell in the house of the LORD – heaven - forever!”*

Sheep don't live forever, but we do, if we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. Animals don't have souls like we do. When our bodies go into the grave, our souls live on. We will one day stand before God for judgement reunited body and soul, and then we will be sent to one of two places – heaven or hell.

- Heaven is the house of the Lord, The Presence of God, and it lasts forever!
- Hell is the place reserved for the Devil – The Lake of Fire – and it too lasts forever!

Conclusion

Of course we can see the benefits from this Psalm of belonging to the Good Shepherd.

There are only two possible owners in this world – The Lord, the Good Shepherd. Or the Devil, the liar and the thief (John 10:10) *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and to destroy”* But as Jesus says, *“I have come that you might have life – life in all its fullness – truly abundant life!”* AND - Eternal life in heaven.

Praise God, we know the Lord as our Shepherd and Saviour, so we will lack nothing. But remember for others to reject him as their Shepherd and Saviour, they will one day have to face him as their Judge? Then they will lose everything and be banished from His Presence forever!

But it's great to be able to say:

“Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!”?

i.e. Because the Lord is MY Shepherd, that's why I will lack no good thing!