

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Comments from Book 1 of the Psalms: Psalm 23

The story is told in 1 Samuel 17 of a day when the great king David, still a young man at that time, was looking after the sheep. He tells the story himself to King Saul. He noticed a lion had come and had stolen a sheep from the flock. What could David, only a shepherd boy, do? He had the care of those sheep at heart and immediately went out after the lion and took the sheep from its mouth. The hungry lion then attacked him. David did not run for his life but fought the lion, seized his beard and slew him. The same thing happened again but the second time it was not a lion but a bear! What tremendous bravery David showed for what was, after all, only a lamb. One lamb, surely, would not have been noticed! David's deep concern was for the wellbeing of all the sheep. This lesson in care taught him so much about the care of God for him personally.

It's a happy thing to be able to talk about David, not now as the shepherd but as he sees himself, a sheep in the flock of God. He has reversed the position, knowing what dangers have faced him in this world. He now claims the greatest shepherd of all, the Lord, as his shepherd. This lovely Psalm 23 is, perhaps, one of the most well known passages in the Old Testament. In it David describes the intense care shown by the Lord to all His sheep. As we read it together today we can bask in the sunshine of all that the Lord also does for His sheep today. Whatever our position, we need never forget the words of 1 Peter 5:7, paraphrased, 'Casting all your anxious care on Him for He cares so much about you'.

This Psalm is central in a group of three.

Psalm 22 speaks of the Lord in His sufferings. It refers to the Past.

Psalm 23 speaks of the Lord's care. It refers to the Present.

Psalm 24 speaks of the Lord as King. It refers to the Future.

These three Psalms are progressive too. We cannot really know anything of the care of the Lord until we have learnt of His sufferings as Saviour. In our Psalm today, we will think of the One who helps His people in all their difficulties and troubles.

In looking at this Psalm there are three sections which describe the great blessing David felt with the presence of Jehovah in his daily life:

In verses 1-3 we have His care in every situation.

In verses 4 and 5 we have His companionship even when trials abound.

In verse 6 we have His comfort each day of our life.

There is another lesson in this Psalm. Whatever the failings of the sheep, God's care is unconditional. Because of this, the Psalm is full of assurance.

HIS CARE. Verses 1-3.

This section is all about the person and purposes of God. It also can be looked at in three sections. The first describes: **Who He is.**

David begins the Psalm by referring to the Person as 'the LORD'. The whole comfort of the Psalm depends on this. There is no one so powerful, as Creator, as Sustainer and Provider of the whole universe, than 'the LORD'. David claims direct association with Him. It is imperative to begin with this for we must give the Lord His proper place in our life. David acknowledges this One as supreme, the One before whom he must bow in full dependence. It is from this that all blessings will come.

Then we learn that He takes the position of a shepherd. No one knew better than David the care of a shepherd. The safety of the sheep, in the many difficulties and dangers which surrounded them, depended on the shepherd. The apostle Peter, in 1 Peter 5:8, refers to 'the devil as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour'. That Devil is so active today. How much we need the same Shepherd's care. With Him we can resist the Devil. It is a

great comfort to read Psalm 121:3 and 5, 'He that keepeth thee will not slumber...The LORD is thy keeper'. Our Shepherd, having already passed through the wilderness Himself, knows all the dangers of the way. What a wonderful Shepherd!

We cannot pass over the personal claim of the writer. From personal experience, David can say, 'The LORD is my Shepherd'. The Lord of all, he says, 'is my shepherd'. He cares for me! This is not only a present truth but also a personal blessing. Is He the shepherd of others in the flock? That is of little account to this sheep; He 'is my shepherd'. Do you experience Him as your Shepherd too?

We must pause just here. Although the Lord is the shepherd who cares for His sheep and is ready to bless in spite of ourselves, we cannot look forward to any of the blessings which follow in this Psalm unless we are prepared to trust Him and allow Him to act as our shepherd. Only when we do so, can we claim what David says, as ours too. 'The LORD is my shepherd'.

We learn more from the New Testament about this Shepherd. He is: 'The Good Shepherd' – John 10:11. We learn that the Good Shepherd does not consider his own safety and interests in His care for the sheep. That care is paramount to Him. The Lord Jesus is the perfect example of this. He tells us in that same verse in John 10, 'the Good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep'. Here is the extent of His care. When we first learn that He has died to save us from our sin we hear something further. 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand', John 10:27-28. What a Good Shepherd, what security for all eternity He gives!

Furthermore, David claims that knowing the shepherd means much more, 'I shall not want'. All need is supplied. There will be full satisfaction when he stays within the bounds of the flock for there is a shepherd who can provide for all the necessities of life. Here is tremendous confidence for the sheep. In this confidence we can be at rest.

When we come to verse 2 the Psalmist tells us **where He leads**.

First, we see what safety there is for the sheep. 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters'. When we sit, we rest but to lie down gives the idea of full refreshing rest. This is complete rest. How often we may wander in fields without pasture. How often we are alongside troubled waters. But this is not His way. The lion brings no fear to us when we walk with the Shepherd. In the midst of plenty He says, 'I will guide thee with mine eye', Psalm 32:8. He leads where the pastures are green and the grass is tender. He brings the sheep into a place of true rest. He leads by still waters, there is nothing to disturb but there is everything for satisfaction. 'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst', John 4:14. How clearly David appreciates all that His Lord has done for him. Could any of the sheep ever wish to stray from the rest and satisfaction which He provides? May we consciously rest in the knowledge of His direction in our pathway too.

A further aspect is introduced in verse 3. Speaking of the shepherd, the Psalmist tells us **what He does**.

The first is that 'He restoreth my soul'. In verse 2 we found the 'body' being dealt with. Now we find that the Shepherd is able to deal with the whole person. The soul is being restored. How much more important this is than the body. We have a Shepherd who is capable of dealing not only with the physical but the spiritual too. Before there is any mention of the problems, David says 'He restoreth my soul'. This is of great comfort to a sheep in difficulty. In all the trials of life, He restores. Even when any believer fails and sins, the apostle John tells us in 1 John 2:1, 'we have an advocate (one who will plead our cause) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous'. That Advocate is always successful. 'He restoreth my soul'. He takes us as we are and deals with our wounds. He restores communion with Himself and our joy returns. This is part of His wonderful work.

Then the restored soul is led into 'paths of righteousness for His Name's sake'. When He leads it can only be in right paths. There can be no failure for His Name is at stake. What a grand lesson we learn when we depend on Him. Paul writes in Philippians 4:6-7, 'Be careful (have anxious care) for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus'.

HIS COMPANIONSHIP Verses 4 and 5

An interesting change takes place in these verses. In the first three verses the Psalmist describes the qualities of the Shepherd, who He is, what He does, and where He leads. When we come to verse 4, we find David discussing his position with the Shepherd. No longer does the Psalmist speak of the Shepherd as 'He' but David now speaks directly to Him – 'Thou'.

The first thing David understands concerns **His presence**. There are difficulties ahead but the true sheep sense His presence personally. The difficulties are most demanding. There is 'the valley of the shadow of death' to face but the sheep need not face this alone. Some have suggested in this verse that we face death itself but this verse speaks of our 'walk through the valley of the shadow' and, what is more, the Psalmist is able to come through this and find blessing on the far side.

As we pass through the valley, we may sense the darkest hour of our circumstances. The valley is deep, the surrounding hills are steep, the path is narrow. Here we have the shadows of death, perhaps of parting from loved ones, loneliness, or lack of earthly companionship, but when we walk with steady step with the Lord, we can be assured that we will come 'through' that valley. We know that the shadows may be dark, but it is not all dark. A shadow is made up of dark and light.

Now the wonderful thing is that David could say '**Thou art with me**'. We may be surrounded by evil but there is nothing to fear. The Lord Jesus says, 'I am the light of the world'. John 8:12. There is the certain light of the resurrection, the knowledge of full salvation and the light of the news that eternal death has been abolished. "O death, where is thy sting?" writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:55.

With the presence of the Shepherd we may also know the comfort of His rod and staff. In no way are these intended to be used for beating the sheep into submission! Their purpose is to protect, to guide and to rule the flock. The rod is used to bring the wandering sheep back. They lead us to better pastures. What dependence we can enjoy with His comfort! The apostle Paul could say, 'I know whom I have believed' 2 Timothy 1:12.

Let us just go over again the way we can act as we may suddenly face the valleys of life. There are five steps to progress.

- **With composure** – we can walk because 'the Lord is our Shepherd'.
- **With confidence** – in spite of the shadows, there are lighter aspects and a bright hope ahead.
- **With courage** – we need fear no evil. Once we feared when difficulties or death would have intervened, but not now. Every loss in this life is gain with Christ.
- **With a companion** – the shepherd is present. 'Thou art with me'.
- **With comfort** – we are assured of the protection of the Shepherd Himself.

We also find that there is even more than His presence. There is **His provision**. Verse 5 tells us there is a table, there is oil, there is a cup. All the supplies necessary are provided for the way. Let us look at these for a moment.

The table indicates provision for all our need, a veritable feast to enjoy. It can even be seen by all those who would wish to upset, to break down or to destroy. All is provided by the One who cares. What food we can enjoy from the Word of God! Our circumstances may well be in the shadows but we need never be concerned, for it is the Shepherd who ensures that the table is provided. He it is who says, 'I am the bread of life', John 6:35. No enemy can prevent the feeding from His provision.

This leads to a further matter. It is at the table that we can also enjoy sweet communion with the Lord Himself. In Revelation 3:20 the Lord says, 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me'.

There is also oil. According to eastern custom, whilst at the table the host would rise and pour oil upon his guest. This had a soothing effect on a traveller and was a mark of the highest honour. Perhaps a servant could have undertaken the task for a lower ranking guest but when the master himself did this, what blessing was intended. Sadly, the Lord Jesus says to Simon, into whose house He was invited: 'My head with oil thou didst not anoint', Luke 7:46. He was invited but missed any real desire on Simon's part to have Him there.

The expression used here in connection with the oil signifies 'made fat'. The oil is used plentifully and is a special mark of personal care for the abundant blessing of His sheep.

Again, the oil speaks of the blessings of the Holy Spirit. In 1 John 2:20 the apostle says: 'Ye have an unction (an anointing) from the Holy One'. The youngest babe in Christ has the indwelling Holy Spirit. What bountiful provision this is indeed! John, in his gospel, tells us more about the work of the Holy Spirit:

- John 14:17 'He dwelleth with you and shall be in you'. There are no doubts.
- John 14:17 'The Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive'. He cannot be with those who do not receive the Lord Jesus as Saviour.
- John 16:13 'He will guide you into all truth'. He is the guiding force in our life.

- John 16:14 'He shall glorify Me'. This is the one great purpose in His work.

Lastly we read of the cup. '**My cup runneth over**'. Even with the valley of shadows surrounding, every blessing exceeds our need. This brings an overflowing joy and the Psalmist responds with an outpouring of satisfaction from his heart. Surely we also are able to give true worship to God for all His goodness.

HIS COMFORT. Verse 6

The first thing we read is the word 'surely'. David knows there is no doubt. He would tell us if we could ask him – 'God has never let me down'.

What a real encouragement we have in the knowledge of His 'goodness and mercy'! The writer knows that the full blessings of God are constantly flowing out in two ways.

There is **Goodness**. In every sense God is good and His goodness meets all the needs I have ever had. In Psalm 31:19 the writer exclaims, 'Oh how great is Thy goodness, which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee'. In Romans 2:4 the apostle reminds us also of 'the goodness of God leadeth Thee to repentance'.

There is also **Mercy**. The mercy of God forgives all my failures and draws me back into His way. We may have been like straying sheep, determined on our own course, but His mercy has effectively changed our direction, saving us from the result we deserved. In every experience we have, whatever test we pass through, the green pastures and still waters or the valleys of shadows, we can say 'surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life'.

In the sense of the Shepherd care of God, goodness and mercy are like two sheep dogs at work, one on this side and one on that side, following all our lives, constantly encouraging us back to God's way and close to the Shepherd.

One more thing the Psalmist can say of which he is certain. 'I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever'. Again, there is no doubt. One day the journey will be over. The final sheepfold will be reached. This is 'home'. The Lord Jesus says, 'In my Father's house are many mansions (abiding places): if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you'. John 14:2. Oh, to be there forever! Do you look forward to it? No longer will we see 'through a glass darkly; but then face to face'. 1 Corinthians 13:12. Our Shepherd will be there. He will welcome us Himself. Is He the object of your interest? He may come today and we 'will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever'.

Let us pray in the words of Hebrews 13:20-21:

Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep ... make you perfect in every good work to do His will, working in you that which is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.'

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