

## **Psalm 23:1-6**

### **The Divine Shepherd**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In this time of great uncertainty, with restrictions on our usual way of life, and threats to our health and wellbeing, I'm sure many of you are taking comfort in your favourite bible verses. And it's quite possible that the twenty-third psalm is on that list. It's a favourite at funerals, a source of comfort in our time of grief and mourning. And it is a great source of comfort in our present time as well.

This psalm is one of many written by King David, who is described in scripture as a man after God's own heart. This is David the shepherd boy who defeated Goliath and the Philistines. This is David who played the lyre for King Saul when he was tormented. This is David who became King after Saul, perhaps the most revered king in the history of Israel. This is David who saw Bathsheba bathing on the rooftop, committed adultery with her, and had her husband Uriah killed in a desperate attempt at hiding his sin. Yes, this man who thought more sin would help deal with his existing sin is called a man after God's own heart.

We could spend a lot of time looking at how moral failures like David can still be used for the doing of God's will, but that's not why I brought it up. When looking at Psalm 23, it's helpful to know the man who wrote it. David had experience life as a shepherd boy, he had experienced God's favour and being chosen for a higher purpose, and he had experienced great failure and shame, receiving the consequences of his sin, but also the sweet joy of forgiveness. And all of this comes through in this psalm. And today I'm going to unpack each of the verses for you, so you can have deeper appreciation of this well-known and much-loved psalm.

So, it starts with David declaring that the Lord is his shepherd. Now, of course, we need to imagine the ancient image of a shepherd, who lives out in the fields with the sheep, who knows all the sheep individually and leads them to green pastures and fresh water. The sheep follow their shepherd because they trust in him. And this is what David expresses in the first three verses of the psalm, where he says:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

With the Lord as his shepherd, David did not want for anything. This is the language of contentment, of appreciating what you have as God's gift, God's provision to you. It doesn't mean he had everything he desired, but he didn't lack what he truly needed.

In the imagery of the psalm, the sheep do not lack food because they are made to lie down in green pastures. For us, this has to do with finding rest in the Word of God. The 'green pastures' are of course food for the sheep and the lying down means they are safe in the presence of their shepherd. And so we do this whenever we spend time meditating on the Word of God. Jesus once said that we do not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. He was actually quoting Deuteronomy at the time, from a passage where God reminds the Israelites of their reliance on him as they enter the Promised Land. We need God's saving Word above all else. Even more so than the good gifts of God's creation, like food and water and clothing and shelter. And we need a place where we can rest, and be refreshed and renewed for another day.

And so the psalm continues, "he leads me beside still waters". The imagery of rest and refreshment is repeated, probably because we need a lot of it. God's people often find themselves in need of spiritual refreshment. We live in a wearying and exhausting world, where even our fellow sheep can be trying at times. And again, we can go to the words of Jesus to understand this. Reading from John chapter seven:

On the last and most important day of the festival, Jesus stood up and shouted, "If you are thirsty, come to me and drink! Have faith in me, and you will have life-giving water flowing from deep inside you, just as the Scriptures say." Jesus was talking about the Holy Spirit, who would be given to everyone that had faith in him. The Spirit had not yet been given to anyone, since Jesus had not yet been given his full glory. (John 7:37-39, CEV)

If we thirst and are in need of spiritual refreshment, then we should go to Jesus. He is our good shepherd, and he has poured out the Holy Spirit upon us to give us newness of life.

The next little phrase in the psalm is often skipped over as just a poetic repetition. It says, "He restores my soul", and this happens as our good shepherd leads us to green pastures and fresh waters. But if we look a little deeper, and remember that King David wrote this psalm, then there's a bit more going on here. The word that's usually translated as 'restores' is the same word that means to turn around or to repent. And soul just means you, your life, your existence. Sometimes we make the mistake of treating the soul as some separate entity, as if our body is one thing and our soul another. But this is not how the scriptures talk of us as humans. We are body and soul. We are flesh that is given life by the breath of God. You are your soul, just as you are your body.

And so, understanding these two words, 'restores', and soul', and knowing what we know about David's life, and especially his serious moral failure with Bathsheba and Uriah, how do we read this line of the psalm? He restores my soul. He turns around my life. He brings me to repentance. He brings my life back into his care. All of this is true of our good shepherd.

Sheep go astray, and so do followers of the Lord Jesus. But his kindness and care covers even that. A straying sheep is still a sheep, and the Lord always cares for his own. David himself would stray far, but he did not, and could not, stray beyond the long reach of God's grace and forgiveness. In the New Testament, we need look no further than the Apostle Peter to find an example of a straying saint who was forgiven and restored by his divine shepherd, even after denying him three times.

And having brought us back, restored our life, we then get the next line of the psalm: "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake". Our good shepherd shows us the right way to live. And like sheep with their shepherd, it's more a case of walking closely with the shepherd than trying to figure out where we're going. The fact that the Lord leads his people 'for his name's sake' means that he guides them according to all that his name represents. His guidance is, then, in keeping with his holiness, his love, his faithfulness, his wisdom and all that he has revealed himself to be.

The psalm then changes direction. It changes from a declaration about who the Lord is, to speaking directly to the Lord. It changes from 'he leads me', to 'you are with me'. And David does this as he speaks of going through the darkest valley, or the valley of the shadow of death. It's almost as if even thinking about those dark times in life causes David to look to Jesus, to focus on Jesus. He's no longer just talking about his good shepherd, but to his good shepherd, who is there with him in the darkness. We have the assurance of God's presence with us, but this doesn't erase evil and suffering. But we can take comfort. Our good shepherd has his tools of protection and rescue, his rod and staff, and with them, he keeps us safe even in the midst of darkness.

And then the scene changes. We're no longer outside in green pastures or guided safely through dark valleys, but inside. No longer sheep in a flock, but guests at a banquet. As the shepherd cares for the needs of his sheep, so the host provides for the needs of his guests. But the message of God's presence and protection is still there. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." It's still in the presence of enemies that King David sees himself sitting at God's table. And there is no suggestion here that enemies have become friends.

But this is a good reminder that we were by nature God's enemies. Yet God has reconciled us to himself through the cross of Christ. We are now friends of God because he has restored our soul, because he has led us on paths of righteousness, and he cares for us like a shepherd cares for the sheep. And David emphasises the abundance of God's care in these terms: "You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over." It was customary in those days to receive a guest by anointing him with fragrant perfume and with a cup filled with a choice wine. In this way, the host indicated that nothing was to be considered too good for his guest. David declares that God's care surpasses even this. His head had been anointed, and his cup was overflowing. And so he concludes:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Because David had seen so very much of God's faithful care in every conceivable situation, David knew he could count on God's goodness and mercy every step of the way. And he uses even stronger language than that. The word often translated as 'follow' is better translated as 'pursue' and given the reference to enemies just a bit earlier, it sets up a comparison. Instead of being pursued by our enemies, we are pursued by God's goodness and mercy. Instead of enemies that are pursuing with an intent to overtake and destroy, God's goodness and mercy pursues with an intent to restore and give life.

And what God does for us in this life is a small foretaste of what awaits us. A glorious day is coming when all God's people will be gathered around God's table in his everlasting house, no more dark valleys, no more threat of enemies, just the refreshing presence of our Good Shepherd. The people of God will then be with the Lord who cared for them every step of the way. And they will never be separated from him.

This is the great comfort we find in this psalm. Our God is with us as our good shepherd. He cares for us, provides for us, leads us in life, protects us from danger, and invites us into his eternal banquet. And for that, we give him thanks and praise for all eternity. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.