

Psalm 23 has helped and inspired many across the ages. It is a psalm of trust in God and draws together many elements that we have been looking at in past weeks. It is a psalm that helps us to see what the Christian life could look like.

### **Life lived in the care of the good shepherd**

In many ways to examine it and dissect it in a sermon would be to take away from it. This psalm is like a beautiful oil painting. We can stand back and look at it in its entirety and it speaks to it. But also like an oil painting as we look closer at the almost 3 dimensional use of the oils there is yet more meaning in the subtleties to be found. He paints for us pastoral pictures of a shepherd, of pastures, paths, hills and valleys. Of a host, a meal, a blessing.

Before we go on – I would like you stop and remember times when you have heard this psalm before and it has spoken to you. In a moment I am going to ask you to turn to the person next to you and maybe share one time. There may be none come to mind and that is okay but there may a time.

I am taken back to a flat in Polwarth in Edinburgh, a bible study in Pilton, my parents funerals, a holiday in the outer hebrides. What about you?

How did God speak to you through it? Was there comfort in the familiarity. Did you see something that struck you anew. Something that stuck with you?

Turn to a person near or next to you and if you don't know them introduce yourself and mention a time you remember singing or hearing or reading this psalm.

Let's look at it again. Have it open in front of you and look at it with me.

The first image he creates for us is that of a shepherd verse 1. It is an image far removed from our urban life. But it was a skilled job especially in an environment that could be as harsh as the middle east. Skill in increasing the flock, creating good stock, protecting them, providing food and water for them, nursing them, you even got to know whose lambs belonged to who, they would know your voice and if they saw you come running to you.

And who is this shepherd. Who is this skilled carer. It is of course the Lord. Yahweh. One who is boundless in energy, care, vigilance, ability to protect, to lead, to guide, in wisdom, in might, in majesty, in creativity, in understanding, in ability to deal with the real world of day to day living. For the world of the shepherd was that knew danger, his features would be weathered, his hands dirtied by the reality of daily life and work. The picture is not one of a sterile clean figure floating

a few feet of the ground watching saintly over the sheep. It is of a God who is active in his care.

In the old testament he is seen as the Shepherd his people Israel, in this Psalm it speaks of his individual shepherding over David but also in the New Testament we have the picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who leads his flock, his church worldwide, who leads congregations, who leads families and individuals – even from their earliest days – those within his covenant bond.

This Shepherd is seasoned in his experience. This is not rooky watching over them so there is no fear of want.

Verse 2 we are taken to the next image

The sheep may have had to endure the rising heat of the day as they journey. All the grass had been eaten in one patch now it is time to find fresh supplies. The picture is of a shepherd who leads his sheep to a well watered, lush and maybe shaded area. The picture is tranquil isn't. There is no raging torrent to scare the sheep. The rigors of the walk are over and so the sheep are made to lie down so they are not overstretched. This is a shepherd who leads to rest and lays to rest.

The picture is created to remind us that within the provision of care of Lord Jesus - he is concerned that

we are refreshed in soul. As a culture we are good at physical rest and relaxation – holidays, short breaks, tv, book, crosswords, sudoku, time with friends, meals out, meals in, BBQ's.

We are not so good at soul refreshing and restoration. Though it is becoming more trendy to talk about it now.

Our shepherd – he is the restorer of our souls. The restoration begins with putting our faith in him. And he restores new life into our souls by his spirit. Now maybe there are some folks here who do not feel they have ever considered the Lord as Shepherd over their lives. Why not ask him now? Receive him as the Shepherd of your life. The one who brings restoration to your soul by bringing you closer to God.

But how practically can we receive this soul refreshment?

Time spent reading the bible and in prayer each day or at some point in the week can make the world of a difference as we allow God to have say in our lives. There are lots of helpful booklets to help with daily reading and prayer, we have mentioned some in the past – the faith mission bookshop In town has shelves of different kinds of material. It might be a good idea if you don't already use them to start doing so. Do it as an individual, do it as a couple, do it with the kids. These times can become like the

oasis on the desert. A place of refreshing and renewal for each day and week.

Hopefully fellowship together in church and in housegroups and in prayer meetings will be places you can find that refreshing. We should be experiencing the Lord himself by his Spirit refreshing us for service and ministry in the coming months. Both here in the church, in your service of him in your work and in your family. The places where you are seeking to live out your Christian faith and convictions. That is what life lived in the care and provision of the good shepherd should look like.

The next picture that he creates is of the shepherd leading from the front (and the shepherd leads from the front, the butcher drives from the back). Leading and guiding vs 3 on the paths that have been created over time. He knows which ones to follow.

Have you ever come to a crossroads and wondered the way to go and from nowhere the Lord seems to make things clear. It can happen in many different ways. Here is one example – at the focus group I ask a different person each week to share something of their experience of God, faith, the church and life. It was Allan McCallum's turn last Tuesday night. He shared that he had been looking for guidance from God and a sermon really spoke to him – it was about Moses being used by God even in his older years. A complete change of direction for him. It was that that

prompted him to apply for the job he is now working in, something completely different from his trade.

God does guide. It may be like that. It may simply be that you have been praying and someone says something and it rings a bell with you. It might be that it is plain in the eyes of others what you should do because of your gifting. God's guidance can come in all shapes and sizes. His guidance will lead you in ways that are truthful and not dishonest. That will be in accord with his will explained in his word – that is really the meaning of the phrase 'for his name's sake'.

As a congregation we are looking for ways forward and we are looking to the Lord to guide us. He is the Shepherd over this congregation. We need to keep looking to him and his word. The paths he may lead us on may be unknown territory to us but they are not unknown to him.

The next picture is of a valley, a dark one, a place of shadows, a place to be wary.

The bible, faith in God is realistic. We all go through dark places and dark times. It might be unemployment, it might be illness, it might be family difficulties, work stress, money worries, anxiety for one reason or another, concern for another, facing the prospect of death itself. Times when our gaze drops and all seems dark.

In times like these we are encouraged by the psalmist to look up. Remember who is in front. The Lord who loves you. The tender shepherd. His presence can bring strength and courage and comfort beyond our own resources.

You know that is why it is good to grow in faith and closeness to God in the good times so that when the tough times hit we are looking to and calling to a known shepherd.

The one who walks ahead – Staff in hand to just keep you on the path. Rod in hand to scourge and terrorise the wolves and predators – who skulk at night and in the shadows.

You know there are even times when all we can do is let the Shepherd carry us. I remember after being diagnosed with a cancerous growth being quite low. I felt faithless but I did know the love and prayers of many other Christians and through them felt the Lord carry me. I was faithless but he was faithful. Even in the darkest of hours the Lord can comfort.

The picture changes from that of a Shepherd to that of a host vs 5. One who holds enemies at bay. And prepares the finest of meals – where there is no need to rush. Where there is time for anointing, which is a sign of blessing.

We cannot please all of the people all of the time. There are those with whom we clash in character. Those who do not like the values and beliefs we hold. Those who are opposed to the gospel. They can cause us to fear but as Paul reminds us – if God is for us who can stand against us.

So with the Lord Jesus as Shepherd and host over our lives. With him leading, restoring, guiding, protecting there should be a life where goodness and love follow in it's wake vs 6.

Where, when there is a realisation of the goodness of God there is a desire to be in and aware of his presence and help and leading always. Which is what the last verse means. It could be loosely translated and I want to be conscious of the Lord's presence all the days of my life.

These a powerful and beautiful images. They evoke emotion and response. They are there to encourage trust and faith in God.

In the quietness I would like you to read through the psalm again. Peter will play the music for the next hymn gently. And affirm in your heart in silent prayer – that you want the Lord to be the Shepherd in your life. To restore, to guide, to help, to protect, to comfort and that you are willing to follow in his paths a life lived in the care of the good shepherd.

