

Fourth Sunday of Easter Year A (3 May 2020)

John 10:1-10, Psalm 23

A Psalm for the Living - Reverend Dave Deeny



The 23rd psalm is one of the most loved of the Psalms. The risk then is that we ‘switch off’ when we get to it. After all, we know it. May I invite you to look at this Psalm through fresh eyes this morning. Let us start with the first verse.

"The Lord is my shepherd." The Psalmist is saying that the eternal God of the Universe ... *is his personal shepherd.* It's personal - God cares for him. Verse 1 goes on to say, **"I shall not want."** - The Lord's ‘sheep’ are not lacking in anything. Whether we are in the green pasture or the dark valley, the Shepherd, our shepherd, remains at our side, and that is all we ever need.

The Shepherd **"makes me lie down in green pastures."** Not just any old pasture. Lush green pastures! If we think about what is needed for such pastures, we quickly realise that green pastures can only grow where there is fertile soil and a plentiful supply of water. There must also be sunlight and warmth from time to time. Our Shepherd brings us to lie down in such ‘green pastures.’ This suggests that everything that is needed for me to thrive and grow is provided by the Good Shepherd.

The psalm goes onto say that he ... **"leads me beside quiet waters"**. These are not raging waters that are dangerous and treacherous. They are not waters that threaten to flood the bank and overwhelm me. These are quiet waters, tranquil

waters, peaceful waters. I am sure that you can imagine in your minds eye a scene beside a nice tranquil river, in a lovely meadow, with green pastures, and with the sun warming you. This is the environment to which our Good shepherd takes us.

I once read about an article by a pastor and author who had previously worked as a shepherd. He related that is not possible to get sheep to lie down unless certain conditions were in place. Because of their timidity, sheep refuse to lie down unless they are free of all fear and threat. They will not lie down if they are tormented by flies or parasites, or if they are hungry. (Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, 35). All of these threats must be addressed before sheep will lie down. Translate this into our context, and I hear David saying that the Lord helps us deal with the obstacles in our life for the purpose of giving us rest. If we allow the shepherd to do so, he will provide these conditions for us; green pastures and quiet waters.

And then ... **"He restores my soul"**. This presupposes that my soul needed restoration. I was not necessarily in a place of peace, tranquillity or wholeness. The Shepherd brings me to green pastures, ... beside quiet waters, ... and he restores my soul. What ultimately matters in life is not our physical comfort, but **spiritual restoration**. Notice that this is not something, according to the psalmist, that we accomplish on our own. Like sheep, we are prone to go astray if left on our own devices. David recognizes, and we must recognize, that we need to be guided by the Shepherd if we are to get this restoration.

When we read about the green pastures, quiet waters and the restoration of our souls, we might think these are the primary blessing of the Shepherd, ... but they are not. The green pastures and quiet waters may give way to **"walk(ing) through the darkest valley"**. The constant in this psalm is not the darkest valley that we may have to walk through. The constant in Psalm 23 is the presence of God/the Shepherd:

**"Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me,"**

The primary blessing of the Shepherd..... is the Shepherd Himself.

There will be times when we experience the darkest valley. This could refer to times when we feel abandoned, alone, or rejected. I don't know what your experience has been, but whenever I'm in a bad situation, I sometimes wonder where God is. Have I lost the Shepherd? That can be a scary place to be! At times such as those, the Psalmist reminds us that the Good Shepherd is leading us to where he restores our souls. Our Shepherd never leaves us, never forsakes us. Therefore, we have no reason to fear. We have all we need. That is a great comfort.

David then writes, "**Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**" The 'rod' was a club that the shepherds used to protect the sheep from predators.

The 'staff' was a slender pole with a little crook on the end that was used to aid the sheep. The crook could be hooked around the leg of a sheep to pull it from harm. Or it could be used as an instrument to direct, and occasionally to discipline, the sheep with taps on the side of the body.

Understanding how shepherds tend their sheep has helped me so much in understanding the character of God. When I go wandering off, he doesn't say, "there goes that stupid sheep again," and --WHACK! -- down comes that big club! No! His attitude is, "how can I help my sheep? How can I move in to bring him back into line? How can I comfort him and supply what he needs?" God may have to discipline me, but he always does it in love. The blessing of the Shepherd is not an elimination of our problems. **The primary blessing of the Shepherd is the Shepherd himself;** one who *goes with us* through our problems and concerns.

In verse 5 we read, "**You prepare a table before me.**" Think about that! A banquet table prepared for me, for you! The table is symbolic of our fellowship with God. We will dine in the presence of God himself. In the ancient Near Eastern culture, at a banquet, it was customary for the host to anoint guests with fragrant oil, and then to pour a drink for them. But David says that we get more than that. When our drink is poured by God, "**(our) cup overflows.**" Our cup overflows with the

many blessings given to us. Jesus is preparing a table for you and for me; a table that contains the bread of heaven and the wine of everlasting and abundant joy.

I love the next verse. God has prepared this table for me, for us. Where? **“In the presence of my enemies.”** God offers us the protection of a host, even when our enemies surround us.

Whether we are looking at the shepherding imagery, or the imagery of the table of fellowship, the main theme of Psalm 23 is plain to see. David is describing the joy of being in a personal relationship with God; a relationship that has no end.

**"Surely goodness and loving kindness
will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever"**

The Shepherd image is an important one for Jesus. He often used it. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus refers to himself as the **Good Shepherd**. Jesus takes this Shepherd analogy further. Shepherds took their sheep into protective pens at night. There was a gate to protect them from thieves and predators. **Jesus** refers to himself as **the gate** to this safe place! One can only get into the safe enclosure through him. There is no other safe and legitimate way. Jesus goes on to say that whoever enters through him ... will be saved. These ‘sheep’ ... **“will come in and go out and find pasture.”** Then Jesus refers to those who try to get into the safety of this pen in ways other than through Jesus as being thieves and robbers. They come to kill and destroy, but Jesus, he told us, came so that his sheep ... **“may have life, and have it abundantly.”**

In closing, it seems to me that the message today is that in Christ, the Good Shepherd, we do not just survive, **we flourish**. We don’t just get by, **we thrive**. We don’t just exist; **we have life in abundance!** Jesus, the Good Shepherd, offers more life than most of us imagine possible.

Revelation 7: 16-17 sums this up really well:

**"... the Lamb at the centre of the throne
will be their shepherd,
and he will lead them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."**

"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

(Revelation 22:20)