**Psalm 23**

The LORD is my shepherd

Who takes care of you?

Who do you follow?

Who or what do you full back on when in trouble?

Who or what is your shepherd?

Is it family, a friend, a husband or wife, sport, Netflix, Facebook or Instagram, snapchat, google maps when you’re lost, YouTube, Spotify, your money, work, a super fund?

Perhaps it’s the stock market, your sense of control or independence, travel, food or exercise

The options are endless

Church goer or not, like me, you probably have many shepherds, many objects you rely on to tend your soul

When it all boils down each sheep really is the shepherd of their own soul

Against such a backdrop we read the words of a man who tended sheep, a shepherd

The words of THE shepherd of Israel, King David

The LORD is my shepherd

That’s a personal claim and affirmation of trust

God’s personal name for family, capital L O R D, David claims is my shepherd

Perhaps the LORD has placed this Psalm here before you today so that you might reassess who or what is shepherding you

Perhaps David’s claim, for the first time or once again, might become yours

Can you share in his opening words as I am challenged to, the LORD is my shepherd?

Let’s pray

I was born and bred in Greensborough

As a borough boy my knowledge of shepherds is nill

If you asked me about the nature of sheep, I’d use words like delicious, tender and best served with gravy and veggies

So, in light of my ignorance and probably yours, let’s discover together afresh what the good, great and chief shepherd does and how we, his sheep, must respond?

Three points and I’ll pray at the end of each. Number one

**The good shepherd provides**

From verse 2

He makes me lie down in green pastures

He leads me beside quiet waters,

He restores my soul

The good shepherd, the LORD, says David, provides

It doesn’t take a brain surgeon to know that sheep need grass and water

But take note that the LORD provides green healthy pastures for the sheep to feed from

And quiet waters, the only waters, where he knows the sheep will be able to have a good drink

Sheep don’t know what’s good for them and can’t get what’s best for them

That’s why he makes them lie down and leads them

Perhaps a good way to sum up what the good shepherd is up to can be found in verse 3

He restores my soul

If you can say, like David, the LORD is *my* shepherd, then expect to be rejuvenated, revived and restored back to what you should be as he provides for you

Then you can say, along with David, along with the rest of his sheep, I shall not be in want

When the LORD is your shepherd, you’ll have everything you need

You may not have everything you want, but you will have everything you need

That means if you don’t have something you want, the good shepherd has decided you don’t need it

And it also means that if you have something you don’t want the good shepherd has decided you need it

Either way be assured that if you are a sheep in the good shepherd’s flock, he knows how best to provide for you

And so, you can trust him by being content with your circumstances no matter what

I shall not be in want

Sheep don’t provide for themselves, the shepherd provides for them

What does the LORD do as the good shepherd?

He provides for the needs of each of his sheep and in so doing restores their soul

What does it mean to be a sheep?

To trust the shepherd who provides for your every need

How does the good shepherd provide for you today?

Well, you tell me, what restores your soul?

Perhaps it’s his Word

In Psalm 19 verse 7 the other week we read that the law of the LORD is perfect reviving the soul

Reading, hearing, studying, meditating, singing and praying the Bible each and every day revives this sheep

What about you?

Is your life, your goals, your character, your emotions, your thoughts being renovated by God’s Word?

God provides his Word and thankfully elder-shepherds to feed us with it

Perhaps it’s his world

Again, in Psalm 19 David exploded with praise to God for the world he made and enjoyed

God provides moments in nature to revive us and reinvigorate our soul

Perhaps it’s people, friends, family or a spouse

Psalm 88 the other week reminded us of how important close relationships are

Without them the Psalmist was in the darkest of places all alone

Relationships are God’s provision and restore the soul, a fact all too familiar after so many lockdowns

Why not sit down this afternoon by yourself or as a family and list out with thankfulness all the ways your good shepherd has provided for your good

Why not also list out with contentment all the ways your good shepherd has withheld certain gifts from you for your good

He knows what’s best, I shall not be in want

Let us not forget, best of all, that the LORD has provided his good shepherd, the Lord Jesus

I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down; the LORD promised

He did not spare his own son but gave him up for us

Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world

He was led like a lamb to the slaughter

The good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep and took it up again

The barrier which separated us from God, sin, and its consequences, God’s anger, removed

Our relationship with God, restored

It’s because the LORD provided the good shepherd that you and I, and David can say

The LORD is my shepherd

This Psalm stands as an invitation to own David’s words as your own if you haven’t yet

Enter into his fold by trusting the good shepherd who provided himself as a sacrifice to restore you to God

Meet Susan

She’s a hard-working single Mum with one daughter

Complex family history for which she carries her own scars

She’s just started a new job and is paddling hard to stay above water and send her daughter to a private school

Let’s say she’s just owned David’s words as her own

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want

What will change in her life?

Well, I’d hope she’d keep going to work, but now with the knowledge that the LORD has provided that job

Perhaps now she’d stop and give thanks to God for all of what she has

Her job, her child, her health, her energy, her skills, her home, past and present provisions

Not as the fruit of her own labour, but as gifts from God

And not only the small gifts but the big ones too, like the gift of Jesus

I’d like to think Susan might put aside time on a Sunday to meet with other Christians and give thanks together for Jesus

Maybe also her worries might reduce as she casts her cares on him trusting that he cares for her

Susan knows that if he didn’t even spare his own son then of course he will give her everything and anything she needs

I wonder also if she might look back on her past, with a tear in her eye, and remember the many good things the shepherd has withheld from her for her good, to bring her to himself and now to deepen her trust in him

That’s Susan’s story but what about you?

Is your life marked by thankfulness to your shepherd?

Do you trust in the Shepherds wisdom to give and withhold?

Let’s pray

Gracious LORD. You are our good Shepherd. We shall not be in want. You provide for our every need, big and small. You especially take care of our greatest ones like our need for forgiveness, like our need for you. Thank you for sending the good Shepherd to lay down his life so that our relationship with you might be restored, so that we might be forgiven. We, your sheep, turn away from providing for our own needs without reference to you and trust you entirely to provide for us. Amen

Point 2

**The great shepherd guides**

Verses 3 and 4

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

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

Sheep intuitively wander and go astray

Some more than others

They have little sense of direction or they just don’t care and become separated from the flock and isolated

Without a shepherd sheep get lost

It’s up to the LORD as the great shepherd, says David, to guide me

That means if the LORD is your shepherd, you’re a follower

He guides, you follow

So along what direction does he guide us?

In paths of righteousness

That means the track we are following him on is the right path

It involves living in a way that aligns ourselves to doing what is right as revealed in his Word

A sheep in the LORD’s flock as he follows the shepherd will become more righteous just like the shepherd

As Psalm 25:4 and 5 say

Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me

And Psalm 119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path

Why does he guide in that direction?

For his name’s sake

The LORD’s flock bear his name and advertise his reputation

All too often the paths of righteousness take us into and through the deepest darkest valley

But remember, sheep, the shepherd, even there, goes ahead and guides

Sheep aren’t sent through the valley with best wishes

No, when the LORD is your shepherd, he goes first

And here, of all places, deep in the valley, clothed in darkness, David switches from talking *about* the LORD, he, he, he, to talking *to* the LORD, you, you, you, you are with me

It’s in the valley where this sheep, draws closer and comes to appreciate all the more the shepherd’s intimate presence which has no doubt been there all along

Psalm 88 gives you a taste of just how dark the valley gets

Remember Job’s experiences or the Exodus generation

It’s no wonder this Psalm is a favourite for those at deaths door

So, if the LORD is your shepherd and guides you how ought you respond?

I will fear no evil, says David

The valley is a scary place for a sheep

Sheep are so easily frightened and startled, but in the valley understandably so

There are real dangers like predators

But worse still in the shadows your imagination can run wild

Perceived threats can give rise to an overwhelming anxiety rooted in fear

A second time David speaks to himself about what he will not do

I will not fear evil

Any type, real or perceived, this sheep has decided not to be ruled by a sense of fear in death’s shadow

It’s the shepherd presence and particularly the comfort he receives from his rod or staff that puts his heart at ease

Shepherds carried a big stick with them called a crook with a hook in the end

It had many uses

With the crook he could fight off predators like David did

With the crook he could rescue sheep that were stuck

With the crook he could correct a sheep back into line

The crook to a sheep was a symbol of the shepherd’s presence and authority

Authority exercised for the care of the sheep

Sometimes tough, sometimes tender

But to this sheep, David, as he heard the crook tap the rock in the darkness of the valley it brought comfort and a reminder that he was not alone

Perhaps you’ve travelled through a valley or two

Perhaps you’re there now or perhaps you’re just heading out the other side

Wherever you are know this:

The great shepherd, the LORD himself, Jesus, having walked perfectly the path of righteousness, not only entered the valley of the shadow of death, but walked into death itself

He didn’t experience the comfort of the LORD’s presence for at the end he was forsaken, stricken and smitten; afflicted, pierced and crushed; scorned, rejected and despised

He laid down his life

And came out the other side

Why you ask?

For his name’s sake

We all like sheep had gone astray, each of us had turned to his own way

He searched out the lost sheep of Israel and brought back the strays just like he said

He went after the one lost sheep, like Zacchaeus, and left the 99

And not only Israel, but he bought into his flock other sheep not of that pen, like you and I too

Called by name, listening to his voice, following him, life to the full

One flock under one shepherd for his name’s sake

The shepherd who guides you today through the valley has travelled a much darker path

No matter how dark things look he is, by his Spirit and through his Word now, right there up-front guiding away

Having walked in your shoes as a sheep he is able to sympathise with your every fear

And having already travelled through to the other side provides assurance to lead you through

This Psalm stands as an invitation to own David’s words as your own if you haven’t yet

Enter into his fold by trusting the great shepherd to guide you through life, death and to life to the full

Meet Jim

Jim’s lived life to the full

Since this life is all there is, Jim’s made the most of it

Wife, kids, career, travel, Jim’s done well for himself, until recently

He’s just been diagnosed with a rare aggressive terminal cancer the type everyone dreads or perhaps its early onset dementia where you just gradually fade away from the inside

His nightmares have become a reality

All he’s lived for has turned to ash

But through the visits of a hospital chaplain Jim’s just come to own David’s words as his own

The LORD is my shepherd…I will fear no evil

Previously he was stricken with depression over the demise of all he holds dear, he was anxious for the future and uncertain about death itself

Now, realising that the great shepherd has travelled this way before, and leads him on he feels a growing assurance that all will be ok

He’s not alone, any step of the way, every fear has been conquered

Jim recalls Romans 8 often

I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord

This sheep, Jim, in the valley is under the watchful guidance of the shepherd

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out to green pastures

That’s Jim’s story but what about you?

Who sets the direction of your life?

Is your life marked by assurance in the Shepherd’s guidance?

Are you convinced that you are inseparable from your Shepherd?

Let’s pray

Gracious LORD. You are our great Shepherd. We will fear no evil. You guide us in paths of righteousness for your name’s sake, even the valley’s. We thank you that Jesus went before us into death itself and out the other side. We turn away from guiding ourselves and admit we are lost and need your help to put us on the right path back to you. Amen

Point 3

**The chief shepherd protects**

Sheep are helpless

A combination of little acceleration and poor speed coupled with a short stamina means running is futile

There is no camouflage

There’s no poison or sharp teeth

They can’t fight back

There’s no frightening sound to scare away

They don’t collaborate for a united defence

They are soft, fluffy and delicious

Sheep are an easy meal, a fast-food snack

That is, without a shepherd to protect

Verses 5 and 6

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

My cup overflows

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Here, at the end of the Psalm, we find ourselves deep down in the valley with David, determined to fear no evil

Speaking now directly to his shepherd, who is there leading him through, this sheep recounts with greater precision how the LORD protects

You prepare a table before me

It’s a present reality not a future hope or a distant memory

The LORD sets or spreads a table

An animal skin on the ground filled with food

The table is a picture of fellowship and leisure, he is dining with the LORD his host, his friend

It’s a picture of provision, he has food to eat by the shepherd’s hand

It’s a picture of peace, there is space to eat with the absence of fear

But more so, because it’s set in the presence of his enemies, it’s a picture of the LORD’s protection

When David was on the run, he would just grab what he could even if it was bread from the temple

But more often than not he was dependant on the hospitality of others

Time and time again while on the run the LORD protected David by giving him something to eat

Say for example when Abigal, Nabal’s wife, provided a banquet of food in 1st Samuel 25

Or when Shobi and his friends supplied David with food when he was pursued by Absalom in 2nd Samuel 17

Such is the chief shepherd’s protection of his sheep that he is able to spread a picnic rug, in the valley

And not just a picnic, but oil

You anoint my head with oil, how much?

My cup overflows

Oil was used for healing wounds and as a perfume

But here oil signifies an individual that was set apart by God for blessing and prosperity

How much blessing for this sheep under attack?

Not a sufficient quantity, but an abundance

The LORD’s protection next culminates into a tremendous assurance

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life

With the LORD up front paving the way through the valley, David pictures, God’s goodness and love, like two sheep dogs, chasing him behind all his days

When the LORD is your shepherd, you can be certain that all things will work together for your good

When the LORD is your shepherd, you can be certain that his unmerited kindness will continue to show themselves in your life

You can trust the chief shepherd he has protected you from your enemies

The shepherd laid down his life to protect you from your greatest enemies, Satan, sin and the grave

None of which have control or a final say over your life anymore

When the chief Shepherd appears, he will vanquish their reign for good and give to you the crown of life

Safe from thieves and robbers, predators, illness and disease, safe from our own folly

In light of his provision, David shall not want

In light of his guidance, David will not fear

And now in light of his protection, David will dwell in the house of the LORD forever

It’s a fact, not a wish or a hope, but a certainty

The house of the LORD, used often to describe the temple is code for God’s presence

That’s where this sheep wants to be and will be, with his shepherd forever

Not ‘all the days of my life’, but ‘forever’

This Psalm begins and ends with the LORD, God’s name

That is, after all, who this sheep is chasing after and longs to be with

What does it say again of the great multitude in heaven?

‘They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the lamb at the centre of the throne will be their Shepherd, he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’

Rev 7:17

A shepherd at last with his sheep

Meet Tash

She’s been a Christian all her life

She’s finishing high school, but life has been relentless

Pressures with friendships, self-image, employment, education and not to mention from home too

But pressures from the inside too

Anger, impatience, unkind words, disappointment, doubt and anxiety

Life at least at the moment is no ‘season of refreshment’

And yet in the midst of these “enemies” some real some perceived, Tash’s longing to be closer to her shepherd has deepened

Her understanding of Christ’s love has grown through her Bible reading, through her small group, through her local pastors preaching

Through the kindness of others, like her parents, like at youth group or that other church family, the LORD has set a table before her

As she looks back over the valley’s Tash can trace God’s kindness chasing her along and keeping her on track

Things are still a mess, but now more so than ever, she can’t wait to see God’s smiling face and feel his warm embrace

The LORD is her shepherd and she will dwell the house of the LORD forever

That’s Tash’s story but what about you?

Is your life marked by a deepening longing to be closer to your shepherd?

Can you trace God’s kindness through the valleys?

Are you looking forward to eternity with your shepherd?

This sheep, the shepherd of Israel, has been on a journey

From the pastures, to the stream, along the path, through the valley, a stop before their enemies and now at last back home

This Psalm stands as an invitation to own David’s words as your own if you haven’t yet

Enter into his fold by trusting the good shepherd, the great shepherd, the chief shepherd to provide for you, to guide and protect you and to bring you back home safely

Let’s pray

Gracious LORD. You are our good, great and chief shepherd. We long to dwell in your presence forever. Safe and sound under your roof. Forgive us when we’ve tried to keep ourselves safe. You have and are protecting us from our greatest enemies when you sent the LORD Jesus to die and rise again. We thank you. We turn away from trying to protect ourselves and admit without you we’re defenceless. Amen