

The Lord is my Shepherd. Psalm 23

Familiar and Loved.

Psalm 23 is a psalm that carries rich associations for many of us. In my life it has been sung at many family weddings and funerals, taught to us children by my mother from an early age as I said last week.

And for those who know the truth of the first line – The Lord is my shepherd – it is a psalm for funerals, the truth it contains bringing comfort and hope in the face of death, whether of believers you love or when facing your own.

*⁴Even 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.*

*⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.*

And for those who know and can say for themselves the LORD is my shepherd, it is a psalm for weddings, or any new venture – in my parents case being sung as they moved their young family from Cessnock in NSW to Ceduna in SA to serve the Lord with the Bush Church Aid Society, for it speaks of the confidence believers can have when facing an unknown and uncertain future

Psalm 23: The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

*He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*

But familiar as it is we are going to pause this morning to think about the Psalm so that we can be refreshed in the confidence and comfort, the provision and protection it speaks of, and be assured that this Psalm is a Psalm that every believer can have on their lips as their own, that you, if you are a believer in Jesus, can have on your lips. And if you are not yet a believer in Jesus – and that is possible, you can be sitting there and hearing the words yet have no personal knowledge of their truth – I hope God in His mercy will convict you of both the possibility and goodness of relying on Him and you will return to Him, as every one of us has had to, to the one Peter calls the shepherd and guardian of our souls.

There is a lot that could be said from this Psalm, but we are going to proceed by asking and answering three questions

Who is the LORD David claims as His shepherd?

Who can take these words on their lips, truly and rightly say “The LORD is my Shepherd”?

What does it mean for our lives to say “The LORD is my shepherd”?

So to our first question

Who is the LORD?

Israel’s God [Gen. 48:15, 49:24; Is. 40:11, Ps.95:7, 100:3]

The LORD David speaks of is Israel’s God, revealed in His dealings with His people as the only God, the Creator, Almighty. He is the God who first revealed Himself to the people of Israel’s ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, The God who had saved them from slavery in Egypt, entered into a committed relationship with them, a covenant, where He would be their God and they would be His people, and given them the promised land.

And thinking of His relationship to His people as like the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep was one that came naturally to the people of Israel. They were from the beginning pastoralists, tending their flocks. That had been the case in Egypt, in the wilderness wanderings, and continued to be a big part of their livelihood.

David himself, the author of the Psalm, had been a shepherd before being called to serve the Lord in protecting and ruling His people [1 Sam. 16:11, 17:28, 34]

Jacob their forefather had spoken of God as His shepherd

Genesis 48:¹⁵ And he blessed Joseph and said,

*“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,
the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day,*

Later Isaiah would use the image to speak of God’s care in delivering God’s people from captivity.

*Isaiah 40:¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.*

The psalms often refer to Israel as the LORD’s flock

*Psalms 95:⁷ For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.*

The Lord and Israel, Shepherd and sheep – a common and natural metaphor for the relationship, but this Psalm is distinct amongst the Psalms in its direct, self conscious, first person embrace of that relationship

The LORD is my shepherd.

But if the LORD is Israel’s God, how can those of us who are not Jews, take the words of this Psalm on our lips and be confident that they belong to us, individually?

The Good Shepherd [John 10:1-17, Heb. 13:20, 1 Peter 2:25, 5:2]

The answer is the Lord Jesus, who proclaimed he was the good shepherd, not just for the Jews, but for all who would hear His voice and follow Him

John 10:16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

When Jesus says He is the good shepherd He is doing two things.

He is distinguishing himself from all the failed shepherds, the earthly rulers of Israel who had failed to seek the welfare of the flock, whom Jeremiah and Ezekiel particularly spoke about [e.g. Jer. 10:21, 25:34-35, 50:6; Ezk. 34:1-10]. He is the shepherd who will bring abundant life to the flock, not selfishly exploit them and abandon them to predators.

But more.

Way back in the 6th century BC, in the same passage in Ezekiel 34 where God condemned the failed shepherds God had promised to come Himself and rescue His sheep.

Ezekiel 34:11 “For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹²As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

More, He has said that in rescuing them He would also establish a righteous shepherd over them, ‘my servant David’.

Ezekiel 34:22 I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken.

And Ezekiel 34 ends with God saying that at that time

Ezekiel 34:30 And they shall know that I am the Lord their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord God. ³¹And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord God.”

When Jesus says He is the good shepherd He is saying He is God coming to save His people as God had promised, the Son of God who has taken on our flesh and so can unite in Himself the promised coming of God to rescue and the promised reign of David, the Good Shepherd who gathers His people to Himself by His word from every nation. [cf. John 11:51-52]

He, One with the Father, is the Lord, and His sheep are now those who hear His voice and follow Him from every nation, from the whole world [John 3:16], all those who believe in Him by believing the gospel – that He has died for sins and risen again in fulfilment of the word of God, the scriptures.

They are those who now belong to Jesus’ flock, depend on Him for the gift of abundant life.

So that gives us the answer to our second question, doesn’t it.

Who can take these words on their lips, truly and rightly say “The LORD is my Shepherd”?

Believers in Jesus, each of us can say the LORD is my shepherd, for the Lord Jesus in calling them to Himself has made them His sheep.

But that does not say enough

Does not bring home what a gracious gift it is to be able to say ‘The LORD is my shepherd.’”

Who are believers?

They are those who know that once, like all the rest, they had strayed, had wandered away from their God by following their own desires, living by their own laws, not listening to or trusting the one true shepherd. [Isaiah 53:6] Believers know they have sinned against the good God

And so believers know they have become the subjects of a great lost and found story.

A lost and found story Luke 15:3-7]

Lost and found stories are so good aren't they.

Wasn't it good to hear on Wednesday that Hadi Nazari had been found after 13 days lost in the Kosciuszko National Park, and to see the joy of his family and friends.

But every believer is the subject of a greater lost and found story.

Having strayed from God by our disobedience, our rebellious rejection of His word, our peril was greater – eternal death.

And our rescue greater - we are now safe at home with the Lord because the Lord Jesus, leaving heaven, humbling Himself to become one of us, sought us out, tracked us down, and rescued us.

A blood bought rescue [John 10:11, Psalm 22]

Rescued us at greater cost, rescued by His blood. As the apostle Peter says, recalling Isaiah 53, *1 Peter 2:²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

The sin that excluded us from God's people, that meant we could never know peace with God, be at home with Him, has been dealt with by Jesus the Good Shepherd laying down His life for us, bearing our sin, suffering its punishment, in His death.

A word that is heard [John 10:16, 11:51-52]

And having sought us and atoned for our sin the Lord Jesus has now gathered us to Himself by His word, a word He addresses to us personally, calling us by name.

Believers are Jesus' sheep, and He is our shepherd, all because of His grace, His generous kindness, His undeserved love, in seeking us, dying for us, calling us.

Who can say “The Lord is my shepherd?”

Believers in Jesus, and only believers in Jesus

You can't say those words just because you grew up in a Christian home

And these are not your words just because you have an optimistic disposition

And they aren't the reward of being good

And they are no longer just for the physical descendants of Abraham

These words are only for believers in Jesus, who hear the words of the good shepherd and follow Him

They are words for sinners who know they have been saved by God's grace, people who know they had strayed and been brought back to God, brought to life, by the generous love of the Son who sought them, died for them, called them

And that grace is the grounds of our confidence, the reason this Psalm is a source of confidence and comfort, not a boast or source of pride.

For who of themselves could claim such a relationship with the almighty living God?

Could say the holy God is My shepherd, a shepherd committed to me, whom I can rely on.

Claim A relationship that as we will see brings such blessing

None of us would dare of ourselves

And every believer should still be astounded to take those words on their lips

Tremble, thrill, to say the LORD is my shepherd

And not just believe it abstractly, but to know it is true, personally

To know they are by God's grace – by His seeking, saving, calling – Jesus the Lord's sheep forever, for none can pluck us from the hand of our Saviour, from the hand of the Father. [John 10:27-29]

But what is the blessing of being able to say and know it to be true "The LORD is my Shepherd"

And that brings us to the third question

What does it mean for our lives to say "The LORD is my shepherd"?

The context of followers, who still live in this world

As we come to answer that by looking at what God's word says is the experience and confidence of those who can say the Lord is my shepherd

Let's pause for a moment and think of the life of believers in Jesus in this world

Firstly, it is the life of followers

John 10: 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ... *27* My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

To be Jesus' sheep is to follow, to live by Jesus' word. And that word calls us, not to a life of comfort and pursuit of our own goals, but to denying ourselves and taking up our cross, to live lives of loving service, to be willing to be ridiculed and excluded, or worse, for faithfulness to Jesus.

It is the life of entrusting our souls to our faithful creator in doing good, even if it means suffering [1 Pet. 4:19].

So this Psalm is not guaranteeing a life free from trial or difficulty, some of which will come simply by being in this age where we live with all the consequences of the Fall – with the reality of relationships marked by tension, of work characterised by frustration and toil, and ever present death, and some of which will come to us just by being Jesus' sheep.

We see that in the Psalm.

It speaks of the experience of the sheep as weariness of soul, perplexity about direction, the presence of sickness and death, the persistence of enemies.

It is in this context, the context of believers in this age, that this Psalm speaks of what it means to say the Lord is my Shepherd

And we are going to unpack that now by looking at three first person verbs in the Psalm, three ways David, inspired by the Spirit, speaks of his experience of having the Lord as His shepherd.

There are many ways of expounding the Psalm, but these verbs speak directly and personally of the blessing of having so great a shepherd as the Son of God incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ, on whose grace and might His sheep can depend.

And these three are easy to keep in your head, to both comfort and challenge you in your trust in the Lord.

I shall not want

I will fear no evil

I shall dwell

I shall not want

Psalm 23: The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

He leads me beside still waters.

Here is confidence, under the picture of a shepherd's thoughtful provision for the needs of his sheep – lush pastures and quiet, accessible water - in the Lord's thoughtful provision of our needs, in what we need to sustain life. Remember our Lord Jesus made that promise explicit to His followers when he told us not be anxious “*about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on.*” [Matt. 6:25-34] Instead we should live the life of followers, confident in our God's provision, by seeking first

Matt. 6: ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

And we can trust our shepherd in the weariness of life to restore us

³ *He restores my soul.*

It was wearying for sheep to trudge behind their shepherd to pasture in a dry and dusty Palestine. And life can weary us in lots of ways. The demands of others, conflict in our minds with our own thoughts, the relentless routine of work and school, sometimes dealing with the constant nagging criticism of those who object to our faith.

It doesn't say He will spare us that weariness, but it does say our Lord will restore us

As God promised in Isaiah 40:28-31

*Isaiah 40:²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.*

³⁰ *Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;*

³¹ *but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.*

And as the Lord said to Paul, in our weakness we will find His grace sufficient [2 Cor 12:9-10]

As we trustingly follow our shepherd, He will sustain and renew our lives

But life is not just wearying. It is also, at times, perplexing.

That was Paul's experience

2 Cor. 4:⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;

And I have often found myself perplexed, unsure of exactly the right choice where one needs to be made, or of how to respond or live through certain situations.

But the Lord has said He will lead us in paths of righteousness, in the right path, the way that is consistent with being in covenant relationship with Him, being His person

And so in those situations I keep following – keep living His way – whether that means not responding in kind, trying to return good for evil, or exercising self control in my words, or in humbling myself to accept the decisions of others who have the authority to make those decisions

And when I have a choice of two goods, or two options with outcomes full of uncertainty, outside my control, I choose trusting Him

*He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*

Confident that He will keep me, for He says He will lead us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

That is, He has staked His reputation in the world, the honour of His name, in guiding His people into the right path, the path that will sustain us in our relationship with Him

Knowing the commitment of our Good Shepherd to us, to providing for us, preserving and keeping us, we should honour Him by contented following [1 Tim. 6:6-8]

Not a querulous anxiety, or a grumbling dissatisfaction, or fear of unknown outcomes

When you are thinking about your life – about what you need, or its demands, or its puzzling choices

Is that your bottom line,

That you are so convinced of the love and power and care of the Lord who has made you His sheep, called you by name, that you say in your heart “I shall not want”, and know the peace that comes with trusting your shepherd

The peace that honours Him?

I shall not want, and I will fear no evil.

I will fear no evil

I think if we are honest as we go through life we become aware of many things that are fearful – some of which will be closer to us, others further from us

If we have children, we can fear harm coming to them, or them making bad choices in bad company

We can fear Loneliness, especially growing old alone, or

A warming planet

For believers – we can fear drifting away from the Lord, as we have seen others do

And then there is Death itself, and the sicknesses that foreshadows our mortality

But the person who can say The Lord is my shepherd can also say

⁴Even 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.*

Even though those things, those evils, cast their shadow over our path, make themselves present in our consciousness, believers will not fear

For our good shepherd is with us

You are with me

That is our confidence, not because we are important, but because our Lord has committed Himself to us in His steadfast love

I am with you always, said our Lord

Think of that

The one with all authority, to whom all things in heaven and earth are subject, stronger than any spiritual power or human might, the one who never fails to do what He has promised, the one who has freely and graciously loved us

In any and every circumstance He is with us, to protect us from harm – as the shepherd did with His rod, His club to drive away predators – and to keep us moving along the safe path, as the shepherd did with His crook, His staff

Many things may threaten, but He is with us, and believers know the comfort of that. We need not fear

Even in death, the death of our bodies which is entrance into the presence of our Lord, He is with us, for what separates us from all those we know does not separate us from Him.

Remember at Stephen as he was dying testified to the presence of the Lord

Acts 7:⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

The apostle Paul could face both his trial and his end confident of the Lord being with him to rescue him,

2 Timothy 4:¹⁷ But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I think many of us nurse a fear of getting old, and of dying, but we should be confident that our Lord will be with us, and keep us, and honour His love and might with a faith that does not fear

Let me share with you J Douglas MacMillan's testimony to his father's dying.

You will probably never have heard of him, but he was a Scottish Free Church minister who had been a shepherd for twelve years before he went and trained for the ministry, and he was giving four talks on this Psalm at the annual conference of the evangelical movement of Wales in 1979, so it is public testimony, and I believe true.

Douglas recounts that in 1957 his father was dying, and he called Douglas in and said

“I have been on the doorstep [of heaven] for three weeks’ – he had been asking people not to pray that he would get better – ‘and I am going to go over it today.’ Then he said, ‘For 40 years I have followed Christ, and for 40 years I have prayed for grace to live for Christ, and for 40 years I have prayed for grace to die like a Christian. I have always secretly been afraid that I wouldn't get grace to die. But now I see how stupid I was. God wouldn't give me grace I didn't need until I needed it; and when I need it, I have it.’ He said, ‘Don't be afraid of death, it's going to be wonderful.’” [J Douglas MacMillan *The Lord our Shepherd* pp. 70-71, Evangelical Press of Wales, 1983]

Do you pray for grace to live for Christ, and grace to die like a Christian, to honour your Saviour now and at that time by saying ‘I will not fear’ because we know He, our Good Shepherd, is with us always, and His grace will be sufficient in our weakness?

I shall not want

I will not fear

I will dwell

⁵ *You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever*

Jesus' sheep have confidence for the present and future.

In this world, they know they will still have enemies. But they also know their God can keep and protect them, and that those who wish them harm can do no more than their God permits for their good,

Our Shepherd is so mighty that even in the presence of our enemies we can enjoy the good He provides for us, can feast in His generous, overflowing provision, the bounty of His love – our cup overflows

And believers are confident that God's grace to them will continue and never cease

⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever*

Goodness and mercy following speaks of God, who is good and abounds in mercy, in steadfast love, being always there, present, to be relied upon, unwavering in His faithfulness and His commitment to His people.

His favour is not a whim, present one moment, lost the next. It is grounded in Himself, and in His determination to save His people, present from before the foundation of the world [Eph. 1:4]

It is secured by the death of our Saviour to atone for all our sins.

This is the love Paul speaks of in Romans 8, the love those saved, justified, by faith in Christ can always rely on.

Romans 8: ³¹ ... If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

‘I will dwell’ speaks of the confidence every believer who can say “The Lord is my shepherd” can have in the gracious steadfast love of our God, the confidence that in that love we will always find a welcome in the presence of our God [Rev. 7:14-17]

The confidence every believer should have, for that love is sealed to us by the death of the Son of God.

It is a wonderful, rich, thing to say ‘The LORD is my shepherd’

To have a life where we can say, all by God’s grace in giving us the Lord Jesus, I will not want, I will not fear, I will dwell.

I hope you see that.

And if you can’t say “The Lord is my Shepherd”

If you Live instead with anxiety and fear about your present and future because you are on your own, harassed and helpless, a sheep without a shepherd

You don’t need to stay like that.

The Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, said He came to seek and save the lost

And He is calling to you

Calling you to turn back from trusting in yourself, from trying to be the source of your own security, your own guide through life

A way of life that won’t deliver the security and flourishing you seek, any more than a sheep thinking it can protect and keep itself all on its own will last long in the world

The Lord Jesus is calling you to turn back and trust Him, to believe His word, the word of the one who laid down His life, died for our sins, only to take it up again on His own authority, to rise from the dead [John 10:17-18], and lives always to keep His people and give them life.

If you need to find out more about him – do.

Come and talk

Read a gospel with us

But maybe you are familiar with Jesus, have heard the gospel many times – but know you don’t know for yourself the confidence and comfort of knowing the Lord Jesus is your good shepherd

You can say the words, but you don’t know their living power in your heart

Call out to Him for mercy, for forgiveness and grace to become His follower, in reality, not just appearance, for Jesus' sheep are only those who follow Him.

He will hear you.

Call out, and come and talk

But if you know the wonder of saying the LORD is my shepherd because you have heard His voice and followed Him

The wonder of being able to say I will not want, I will not fear because He is with me, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever

Be determined to keep being Jesus sheep, to keep depending on Him for life by following Him, having your life directed by His word, trusting Him and doing what HE says

Praying each day for the faith that honours our Saviour in His loving commitment to be our Shepherd by your contentment in His care, your courage in the face of what is fearful, your confidence in His goodness and love for your present and future.

Let that contentment, courage and confidence be seen

And if you have children, teach them this Psalm as the birthright of believers – birthright of those born of God through faith in Jesus

And model the life of those who know its truth before them

One of the great blessings of my life is that we were still singing this Psalm when, after only two years in Ceduna doing the work my parents thought the Lord had called them to, we had to return because of the serious sickness of my father, a sickness that became a chronic, life changing, illness.

They didn't see that as a denial of His love, just as the context in which they would keep seeing His provision, see more of His grace and faithfulness, for the Lord Jesus had made Himself their shepherd by His death for their sin, and lived to save them.

And that is what we as a family saw. More of His grace and faithfulness

We did not want, they did not give way to fear, and now they dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

And that is why I chose Psalm 23, so I could say to you that what David says of the experience of those who can say in truth the Lord is my shepherd is true – the blood bought privilege of and the gift of grace to every believer

The Lord is my shepherd – wonderful to know for yourself

And a wonderful gift to share with others