

A SPECIAL PSALM

Psalm 23 [MW21-17]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton, Sunday 09 May 2021

I remember one quiet Sunday afternoon

- during the summer holidays, when I was in my late teens
I was feeling a bit, well, not sure what it was
perhaps “blah” sums it up best
- I’d just broken up with my girlfriend
I needed to find another holiday job because the one I had was ending
- the family were going out, but I didn’t feel like going with them
I didn’t even feel like listening to any music
in fact I just lay on my bed, not quite sure how to feel ...

I picked up my Bible, this Bible - it had a cover in those days

- and on the inside flap of the cover it had something really useful
you may have seen it - ‘where to look when ...’
where to look when sad, lost, bereaved, lonely, angry, confused etc.
(I’m sure there were happier things too but I wasn’t looking for them just then)
- for each of the ‘where to look when ... sad, lost’ and so on
there was a Bible reference

I’m sure for each and every one of them, it could have listed the 23rd Psalm

- it didn’t, each reference was different
the 23rd Psalm was there in a couple of places
but it would have fitted every situation!
- so I read a couple of those Bible passages the cover flap directed me to
and I’m sure I read those great words of comfort and encouragement
that are the 23rd psalm

Comforting words ... when the day is grey and cold

- when the wind howls, when the rain pounds
when the fire won’t start ...
- reading the 23rd psalm is like putting on a hug
like a cuddle
- or if you’re a bloke
like someone putting their arm around your shoulder
giving you a pat on the back and saying “keep at it”, “it’ll be okay”

However there is more to it than that!

- the 23rd psalm is not only for times when people are down
feeling sad, lonely, distressed
- I’ve had people complain about singing the 23rd Psalm, Crimond
at an ordinary Sunday morning church service because: “it’s a funeral hymn”
- well, yes it is and ...
... and it’s so much more than that!

This psalm is like looking at a family photo from your wallet or purse

- anyone carry pictures of your family, grandchildren around with you?
these days I do what it seems most people do
and have photos of my family on my phone!

The 23rd psalm is kind of like taking out a family snap and looking at it

- you smile to yourself and say 'what a neat bunch of people'
how blessed I am
that kind of thing

Reading this psalm we might say

- what a neat God
yes indeed, I sure am privileged that God knows me and cares about me like that
it's great to be part of God's family!

We know that 'one size does not fit all'

- however if ever there was a Bible passage that came close to that
the 23rd psalm is it
- Psalm 23 is for joy, celebration, happy times
Psalm 23 is for times of sadness, emptiness and difficulty
and Psalm 23 is just as much for ordinary times, the humdrum routine of life
- wonderful words of comfort and hope for all occasions!

Notice especially the first line - here are a few different translations:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want

You, Lord, are my shepherd. I will never be in need.

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.

The Lord is my shepherd: I have everything I need.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall lack nothing.

After a Sunday school lesson one week, a little girl was heard quoting Psalm 23:1 - a familiar verse that many children have memorised. She didn't get it quite right, or perhaps actually she did, when she said: "The Lord is my shepherd. I've got all I want."!

I shall not want, I shall lack nothing ...

- what does that mean?
does it mean I'll have a Jaguar XK8 Turbo in my driveway
and a Harley-Davidson motorcycle in my garage?
- does it mean all my bills will be paid
and I'll never max out my credit card?
- does it mean I'll be on good terms with everyone
and they'll always think I'm the greatest ...

Somehow I don't think that's anywhere near what the psalm is on about!

- it's something bigger and in the end I think better than those kind of things
the Lord is my *shepherd*
there's just no other word that will do it
- the Lord will provide for me and protect me
just like those ancient shepherds who knew the sheep in their flock by name
led them to the best grass, the clearest water
- and even slept with them to keep them safe from wolves and lions

The line: 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want'

- seems especially appropriate for our modern world which teaches people to want *everything*
- Psalm 23 tells us, assures us we do not need to worry about our lives, or deaths: God will provide
- affirming these words means we will live humbly and gratefully as a child of God

I see it like this

- whatever happens, wherever I may be, whatever situation I find myself in there is the promise that I will have all the resources I need to endure, enjoy, survive, grow, make it through
- and experience some kind of blessing

The Lord is not my "boss", the Lord is not Santa Claus

- the Lord is my shepherd
the Lord is your shepherd
- the Lord knows your name, has your best interests at heart
the Lord is committed to your well-being, takes the long-term view
- whatever path you find yourself on, however rocky or winding there will be green pastures, still waters
somewhere for rest, refreshment, nourishment
- there will be nourishment that feeds the soul, the heart of your being

The Lord is our shepherd

- we are promised a place in the house of the Lord
this psalm may seem somewhat individualistic
- however there is a wider, communal dimension
we are part of a whole flock under the care of the Lord our shepherd
- we are part of a family
a family sharing community around God's table
- all that the psalm promises comes together
in being the community of God's people

The great hymn writer Isaac Watts composed a version of the 23rd psalm which seems to draw all this together:

*The sure provisions of my God
Attend me all my days;
O may your house be my abode,
And all my work be praise.
There I would find a settled rest,
While others go and come;
No more a stranger or a guest,
But like a child at home.*

The 23rd Psalm also takes the long view

- it acknowledges that there is more to it than just the joy and pleasures
pains and trials of this life

Sure there are holiday travels, new cars, beautiful gardens, designer clothes

- award winning houses, careers, big screen tvs ...
- these things have some importance, they have a place
- however they will also fade away

Psalm 23 takes the view that life in this world is not all there is

- things that often seem so important are viewed from a different perspective
- an eternal perspective

Life in the here and now is this much [-]

- eternal life, however you may understand it, is more than this [-----]
- this Psalm gives us a glimpse of [-----]
- to sustain us when [-] seems a bit rough
- or to remind us when [-] is good
- that so much more and better awaits
- just a glimpse ...

The 23rd Psalm

- a simple psalm with such encouraging words
- just 6 verses, only 112 words
- and yet there is so much to be said about this one simple psalm

If I acknowledge, if we acknowledge, that the Lord is my shepherd, our shepherd

- and follow him
- then we are going to end up in an amazing place
- life is going to be so wonderful in God's eternal presence
- and in this psalm we are given a glimpse, just a glimpse
- enough to know we have a promise we can be sure of

To help us get a sense of this for the 2020's

- here is the "Kiwi" 23rd Psalm
- by Chris Grantham in his *The Kiwi Bible – some of the early stuff* [PP Slide 1]

God's my best mate, I'll do all right for sure.

He gives me a breather when I need it, He knows just the best place for a cool refreshing quiet one.

When I'm feeling really knackered, he picks me up.

He's got me heading down the right track, he knows what's best.

Even when life totally sucks, no worries – you're right there with me. I reckon that's real cool.

You know just what it takes to keep me going.

You put on a fantastic feed for me, right in front of my enemies,
complete with an awesome relax-making massage. I'm stoked!

I reckon all your love and good stuff will be mine from now till when I cark it.

I'll sure be living in your outfit forever – and then some.

And yet perhaps the concluding verses of King James Version should have the final word
[PP Slide 2]

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Psalm 23: words of comfort and hope for

- the bad times
- the ordinary times
- and the good times