

Opening Up to God

The Psalms are songs of praise that invite us to open up to God. They have been used as a hymn book and a prayer book by countless generations of God's people. The psalms appeal to our emotions. They appeal to our intuition – our deep sense of how things are. They appeal to our minds. They appeal to our logic. They also deal with the subtleties of life, you know when we are better at expressing them than we are at explaining them. 'What has happened' rather than 'Why this has happened'.

All of the psalms are really 'songs of praise'. They express almost every sort of feeling and attitude that people have towards life, from dark depression to exuberant joy. They invite us to open up to God.

Are you ready for that this morning? Are you wanting that? Is that why you have come to church today? To open up your heart, your mind, your soul to God. Because if you have, He is longing to meet you and touch you with His love and grace.

We're going to look at Psalm 23 and the God who is The Lord.

Here is beautiful poetry, image and actual fact all woven together. It is deeply personal and therefore it is for each one of us. It expresses serene confidence in the caring God. Here is one scholar's view; 'Depth and strength underlie the simplicity of this psalm. Its peace is not escape; its contentment is not complacency; there is a readiness to face deep darkness and imminent attack and the climax reveals a love which homes towards no material goal but to the Lord Himself.'

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So now as we look into this psalm let's be receptive to 1) The Lord as Shepherd in the ordinary, 2) The Lord as Shepherd in the extraordinary and 3) The Lord as Host ready to welcome us home.

So firstly, the Lord as Shepherd in the ordinary.

Verses 1 to 3. READ.

We start with this statement about who God is. 'The Lord', not you notice here the 'rock', 'shield' or even 'King' or 'Deliverer'. Those speak of other aspects of his character. But here is God's personal name. And he is 'my shepherd'. This simple but profound metaphor governs much of the psalm so it is about the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. The Lord and his people. Not just as a whole but as individuals. Is the Lord your shepherd?

Here then in these verses is the normal life of the shepherd and his sheep. Day by day their routine is the same. The shepherd is always present, being with his flock all the time, day and night. Leading them to places of refreshment and nourishment. Providing for all that is needed. Refreshing the body and spirit. Guiding to safe places, and to right and good places.

Life in those biblical times was uncertain. Neither water nor pasture could be relied on and predators were everywhere. The sheep thus lived in total reliance on the shepherd who alone could find good pasture and reliable supplies of water and provide protection. This metaphor of the Lord God as Israel's shepherd is, in part, a call to trust in him alone and not to turn to others.

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Where do we turn for our needs, our essentials? Modern humanity believes all too readily in the power of technology to solve all ills. Postmodern humanity believes in anything and nothing. People turn elsewhere, anywhere rather than to the Lord, who is relegated to the margins or becomes just one option among many. No, we need to turn and turn again to the Lord.

The problem, of course, is that trust is hard. Waiting for God to provide in the face of the busyness of life takes patience, courage and faith and none of these come easily.

But the Lord is the shepherd. He is dependable. He is always there, ever present, leading, refreshing and guiding. He does not desert us or let us down. He is utterly reliable for our lives in every way.

The Lord as shepherd in the ordinary.

But secondly here is the Lord as Shepherd in the extraordinary.

Verse 4. READ.

Did you notice that little word 'even'. It opens for us the real world with its rough times, difficult times, challenging times, indeed the darker times. We, as God's people do not get a pass that allows us to bypass hardship. That expression 'the valley of the shadow of death' is indeed the darkest time of all. It is the final crisis of human existence. And all of us will one day face it. But death is not the only 'dark time'. There are many others. Maybe you or someone you know is going through such a time right now.

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And this valley is as much his path for us as are the green pastures. For as the Lord the shepherd is with us by quiet waters he is with us too in the dark ravines. And it is his presence that assures us in our fears.

Did you notice in this verse how the words of description change to words of address? He 'guides', 'leads', 'restores' – but now 'you are with me'. This shepherd is at this time no longer ahead to guide, but beside to escort. And this companion has what is necessary, a rod and a staff – one to defend and the other to control. To defend against what would cause us harm, and to control and keep us beside him.

Here is where image and actual fact flow together. Only the Lord can lead a person through 'dark times'. It depends on Him and His presence with us, you notice, not on us and our awareness. So lack of consciousness or awareness at that time does not prevent going through that valley with the Lord.

These truths are most comforting. I trust you find them too.

The Lord as shepherd in the ordinary. The Lord as shepherd in the extraordinary.

Now thirdly, The Lord as host ready to welcome us home.

Verses 5, 6. READ.

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The dominant motif of the shepherd is now replaced with the idea of a host with his favoured guest. These verses describe a victory celebration where enemies are present as reluctant guests, even captives. The well-set table, the fragrant oil and the overflowing cup all point to a feast celebrating victory, an overcoming. All the adversaries of the previous verse are now in the past. We are in a banquet of celebration.

And what is more, this is no one-off event. This celebration of the Lord's goodness and love has become permanent, continuous. 'Dwelling in the house of the Lord forever' means 'home', the heavenly home has been reached. There is no better place to be.

What about our journey? It may well have lush valleys of rest and clear waters of peace. There may also have been canyons of sorrow and valleys of despair. But in all of this we can know the Lord's presence with us guiding, protecting, healing, restoring and leading us to our home.

Although Psalm 23 is not quoted directly in the New Testament, when Jesus said in John 10, 'I am the good shepherd' his hearers knew his connection with these words. He is the good shepherd, the great shepherd, the chief shepherd, who laid down his life for the sheep, and who one day will appear with glory that will never fade away and will lead them to springs of living water.

So as we've heard about the Lord in the ordinary, in the extraordinary and ready to lead us home, can we now make our response? 'I lack nothing, I fear nothing, I will enjoy God for ever'.