

Psalm 23 (10th century BC); Micah 5 v1-5 (7th century BC) Matthew 9v36-38 (First century AD)

*Micah 5v2-5a As for you, Bethlehem, though you are the least significant of Judah's forces, one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you. His origin is from remote times, from ancient days.³ Therefore, he will give them up until the time when she who is in labour gives birth. The rest of his kin will return to the people of Israel.⁴ **He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. They will dwell secure because he will surely become great throughout the earth;⁵ he will become one of peace***

Matthew 9v36-38 says ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

John 10v14 ¹⁴"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.

Psalm 23

- *The LORD is my shepherd*
- *I'll not want.*
- *He leads me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,*
- *He refreshes my soul.*
- *He guides me along the right paths, for his name's sake.*
- *Even though I walk through darkest valley I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*
- *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*
- *You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows*
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- *Surely your goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever*

TALK: Jesus the Good Shepherd

Sheep

Imagine some-one has died and left you a hundred sheep, but only on the condition that you look after them for a year. Hearing that the sheep are valued at £100 each, you decide to give it a go, and discover after 5 minutes on the internet that there is free grazing on the wild slopes of Dartmoor. Perfect, you choose a high spot, and on a fine summer's day have them delivered there. With your flock facing you on top of the hill, you make an announcement. Now listen carefully, eat lots of grass and I'll come back to this very spot in a year's time, and get you. Make sure you are all there. Enjoy your freedom. Goodbye, see you then! Now imagine yourself a year later driving back to Dartmoor, what do you think you will find when you get there? Think about it. Now park that thought, and we'll come back to it.

Jesus claims to be the Good Shepherd

In Matthew's gospel, we hear that Jesus sees a crowd he is filled with compassion for them. Now that is not our usual response. If there is a crowd in the Underground and we can't get on the tube, or if we are Christmas shopping and it's mad busy, we get annoyed. If we are watching a huge crowd of refugees on our TV screens trying to get across some border fencing, we can be secretly relieved it's not our border. Crowds do not always bring out the best in us. Our compassion is much more easily released by the suffering of an individual especially a child, which is why when the image of a dead Syrian child washed up on a Greek beach caused a rush of compassion towards the refugee situation. But how come Jesus could look at a whole crowd and be filled with compassion for them. We are told why in the next verse. He saw them as harassed and helpless like a sheep without a shepherd. It's an interesting comparison, a crowd of people with a flock of sheep. In our country we often pass sheep in a field without shepherd, so what's the big deal. What is so upsetting to Jesus about sheep without a shepherd?

Jesus takes it further and in John's Gospel, Jesus says – I am the Good Shepherd. Then in Luke's gospel, Jesus puts himself in the story as the Good shepherd, and saves a lost sheep. In doing so, he is retelling a story which in his time had already been around for a millennium since David, the psalmist, tells of the Good Shepherd seeking out the lost.

When Jesus retells the Good Shepherd story (as others like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah had done before him), he places himself in the story and becomes the Good Shepherd, sent by God to find and save the lost. He told this in response to the Scribes and Pharisees who were annoyed with Jesus for welcoming the tax collectors and sinners into his home to eat. Jesus is keen to impress on them he saw them as 'lost sheep'. He not only had compassion for them, but he loved on them, and liked being with them. He had come to save the lost. He had come as the Good Shepherd.

The three main symbols of the early church did not include the cross, dove or communion elements, but were the fish, the vine, and the good shepherd (with a sheep on his shoulder). Perhaps the earliest Christian art-work that we have is in the Roman catacombs and is of Jesus depicted as a shepherd. Why did Jesus and the early Church place so much importance on the Good shepherd image. What was so great about having a good shepherd, and so upsetting when a crowd of people did not have one? To help us find out, we are going to look at his source data, Psalm 23.

David the lost sheep

On this first occasion, the lost was just one person, the sole beneficiary of its first telling was David himself. God is the good shepherd who looks after him. However we must not miss the cultural aspect of this, because it was taken for granted that a man lived in close community with his fellows (which is not necessarily the case today). A shepherd cannot have a flock with just one sheep – it's not economically viable. So it can be taken that the Good Shepherd whilst looking after David as an individual also cares for the flock as a whole, or if you like, a whole crowd of sheep. However the Psalm is very personal and tells us important things about his relationship with his Lord.

I want to look very closely at David's famous psalm to find out exactly how a Good Shepherd benefits a lost sheep. To do that we will first look at the gems in each verse, then take a birds eye view of David's telling of the Psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd.

A shepherd gives his sheep provision, guidance and protection. With that in mind, David starts Psalm 23 with a declaration. The Lord is my shepherd. It is a good place to start. It is a good worshipful thing to do, make a declaration about God. If you agree with David, then tell the person next to you. The Lord is my Shepherd.

I'll not want

Then David says, that because the Lord is my Shepherd, I'll not want. Now what does that mean? We all want things. I would say that I follow Jesus, that he is my Shepherd, but I still want things. Some translations say 'I have everything I need'. David is saying that he has a basic set of needs, and his Good Shepherd provides for these. The Psalm goes on to say what these basic needs are and how his God provides them.

If it were a shopping list it would like a bit like this:-

- *Food*
- *Drink*
- *Soul-restorer*
- *Peace (no fear)*
- *Holy Compass*
- *Protection*
- *Grace & Mercy*
- *Eternal Presence*

For this list of needs that make him fully satisfied in God, look at some of the things not included:-

- Power and control
- Non-stop entertainment.
- 1 mountain of material possessions.

If we are blessed with many good things, then as long as they are not a distraction to God then great. However if we did not have these things then we can still be fully satisfied. It is possible in Jesus, for us to stand tall within our capitalistic society and say 'I shall not want' !

PROVISION: He leads to me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.

First on David's shopping list of needs is food and drink. Generally in summer the high pastures are grazed where it's cooler, and in winter the lower pastures are grazed where there is more shelter and warmth. But there's another factor. In the Holy land, on a good year the rains will start in November and last until February. After 9 months of poor grazing, lush green grass appears, but just for 3 months of the year. The shepherd will lead them there. Nowadays sheep are driven to places by dogs or quad bikes, but in the Middle East the Shepherd walked out in front either playing a pipe tune, or calling out to the sheep. They knew his voice and followed him.

Where there is a lot of grass, sheep are quickly satisfied. After a morning of grazing, the sheep need to drink water, so the shepherd leads them to still water to drink. If the water is flowing, more than a very gentle flow, then the sheep will not drink from it even if it is shallow. If necessary the shepherd will dig a dead end trench coming off the stream so that the sheep can drink still water.

Then in order to let their food digest, sheep need to lie down which they won't do if they feel any external threat. Some translations say that he makes me lie down. You cannot make a sheep lie down. It is better to say that he leads you to a place where you can lie down. There is rest. The good shepherd does not keep his sheep continually on the move. There is of course for the sheep a lot of trudging up and down hills and mountains (and for many of us there will be a lot of trudging through work and chores), but David paints a picture of the shepherd creating a 'perfect environment' for the sheep i.e. He provides the finest food for his sheep (those rare green pastures), and still water that they can confidently drink, and with a safe place to lie down, free from exterior threat, so they can happily digest their food. This is a picture of what the Lord provides for him and his fellows, a perfect place of provision and rest. We know that David led a turbulent life that included murder, incest, betrayal, treachery, civil war, death of his friends and family, and yet amidst all that, he finds this place beside still waters satisfied by God.

He refreshes my soul

There is a part of us that we often neglect. That is the soul. It is the deepest and most needy part of our being. It is like the King on a chess board, the most important and yet vulnerable piece that needs protecting. It craves God (deep cries to deep), and only finds satisfaction in Him. According to Dallas Willard, when the soul is well, we live in harmony with our selves. It keeps our will power in check and on the right lines, our minds do what we will, and our bodies do what we decide. Even in a hectic and challenging world we remain calm and are assured of Gods loving presence. We can then say " I am in the storm, but the storm is not me". When our soul is damaged by sin and neglect, contentment and satisfaction is hard to find.

It is good to be busy and productive. Jesus was, but he also had a very good flow to life, and found the space to be renewed regularly in God's presence. He worked hard but didn't rush. I am often in a rush, trying to cram loads in to my life. I work too much overtime. I know my work, life, rest balance is not good. I should eat less rubbish, and want too but don't. I should take more exercise, and want too, but don't. I should get to bed earlier but don't. When I went to Madrid last month with the boys for a holiday, I made a promise on the flight over, that there would be no rushing. A couple of times I felt my impatience and old habits resurfacing but gained control of them. I made space to be refreshed. Once I was walking around the plaza de Sol near our Hotel and I watched the people sat around the two fountains. I was intrigued. All different types of people doing the same thing. Nothing. I found a space between an elderly Spaniard and a young Chinese man. I folded my arms like them, and just sat there for 15 minutes. It was good. I spent time resting in God. The holiday was good. Really good. When I got home, I knew my soul had undergone some restoration.

We are supposed to have places where we can rest and find peace. The Psalmist says that our job is not to heal our souls but make space for them so that healing can come. He leads me by still water and he refreshes my soul. We

need to make space for Jesus, and keep him in focus as often as you can, and find those spaces where he can refresh and restore your soul.

GUIDANCE: He guides me along the right paths for his names sake.

There was a time when each one of us were properly lost and needed to be found for the first time. We were blind and he made us see. Jesus loves every 'soul' and will do what he can to find the lost. There is though a cost to the lost. The shepherd will be up all night searching the wilderness pastures for his lost sheep putting himself at risk. There was a cost to Jesus too in saving the lost, that was leaving heaven to be amongst us, then paying the ultimate price of his death on the cross. However even though we have been found by Jesus, we still manage to wander off the path of righteousness that he placed us on. As the good shepherd restores our soul, he is bringing us back from the wrong path to the right path. In my rushing around and in my sinning, I lose my way. I need the Good Shepherd to keep steering me back on track again.

In the middle east the sheep knew the Shepherds voice and followed behind him as the Shepherd walks out in front. So David is saying that he recognises the Lord as taking the lead over his life, he is part of his flock, and gives control of his life over to him. Jesus, I will only make a mess of my life if I go my own way, please take control, please be my shepherd. Help me follow your voice.

The Shepherd knows the landscape in ways the sheep cannot comprehend. In the Holy Land's wilderness and hills there are a maze of faint trails worn by countless flocks of sheep, but only the shepherd knows which of these lead to the next pasture and not to a dead-end or cliff edge. The Shepherd is the only hope for a lost sheep. Without him he will die. Without Jesus we have no hope.

Why does Jesus keep seeking us when we are lost? He loves the lost - yes, but he also does it for his own names sake. He has a reputation and integrity to keep. He is God. His desire to seek us out when lost, has nothing to do with us being deserving. He will do everything he can to keep the sheep safe. Why because he has a reputation to live up to of being the Good Shepherd. He loves his sheep and will act without the utmost integrity to keep his reputation. He is not going to say that he is fed up with Kevin Elliott because he has already redirected me 17 times and is not going to do it again. Why because he is the Good Shepherd, his reputation depends on helping me if I want o be helped.

PROTECTION: Even though I walk through the darkest valley I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

The open pastureland of Israel and Samaria extended far down to the Negev desert. Once the lone traveller or shepherd ventured beyond their cluster of villages into the open hills, wilderness, and desert, they were on their own, no police to protect them, or mobiles to ring for help, and no ipad with satnav app to guide them. In the open trackless spaces you could experience, bandits, wild animals (including jackals, wolves and lions), snakes, loose rocks, blinding dust storms, furnace-like heats, and flash floods. As you step out, you do so acknowledging that the Lord God is your strength and protections – your security is in him.

As a young man, I travelled across North Africa with two others on a mission trip and though we had a rough plan, we knew how vulnerable we were and daily prayed for guidance and protection. It was an incredible experience to have to trust on him that was as your Shepherd. Once we were on a mountain pass that was a few feet wide, with sheer cliff to the right and sheer drop to the left. No problem, until round one bend, we found ourselves faced down by some large animals with horns blocking the path. It was too far to go back. We prayed, and found a way to get past the animals. Our unseen shepherd was with us. **He makes us brave.**

There is a very dark and dangerous valley below the Jericho to Jerusalem road which David may have been thinking of. It is a very narrow pass through a mountain range along a river roaring and foaming around jagged rocks. The gorge looms high above and almost touches high overhead, casting dark shadows. The valley is 5 miles long but the pass is never wider than twelve feet. The pathway is up in the rock with a sheer drop to the river, and is so narrow in parts that a sheep could not turn round if faced with danger. Bandits will hide out there and attack travellers. It is a fearful place to pass through. This is not a unique valley though. There are other equally treacherous valleys deserving of the

title, such as the valley that leads to Petra in Jordan, where a group French tourists were swept to death by a flash flood.

The fear of going down this valley can be crippling, but not so for David. He knows that even though at some point in his life, he may need to go through this dark valley, he will be kept safe and does not need to fear evil because the Lord is his good shepherd and is with him. It is the same for us. To get to new pastures and still waters there may be a time or period of your life, where you need to go through the dark valley. Some of you may have already made that journey. No matter how dark the place, do not be afraid of your journey because Jesus is with you.

A sheep has no good defence system, he cannot bite like a dog, kick like a horse, or run like a deer. He is fully dependant for protection by his shepherd with his rod and staff.

The staff is a long wooden pole with a crook on the end. This was used for guiding the sheep, and helping them out of ditches, or from falling into crevices and off ledges. Then there was the rod. Though shepherds like David sometimes used a sling, the rod was his principle weapon for fending off attackers. It is nearly a metre long with a mace like end in which iron bits can be embedded.

The sheep pen was typically a circular stone wall with a small open entrance across which the good shepherd would sleep at night. When he got the sheep pack from their pastures late afternoon, he would count them into the pen. To do so, he would hold out the rod out low and horizontal at the sheep pen entrance. Sheep would squeeze under it in single file, so he could count them easily. This symbolised that they were home safe again.

When the sheep saw the Good shepherd with his rod and staff they felt safe. The first protects the flock from external threats whilst the second helps him during his daily grazing from mishaps. Both are a comfort to the sheep.

Our Lord is all powerful, there is nothing he can not do. Yet he loves you with a deep deep love that are minds find hard to fathom. When we trust ourselves to Jesus and follow his guidance, he will protect and comfort us, in whatever situation we need to go through. He is with us. The Psalms are full of this type of imagery as God as our refuge, fortress, rock and shield. He is our protector. Psalm 62v2 says Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.

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

David describes the ways in which his Lord provides for him, guides him and protects him, just as a Good Shepherd would for his sheep. But then we learn from David that there's more. His Lord keeps giving. There are added extras.

David shifts imagery from the shepherd to a host. We go from food and drink for animals to food and drink for people. Today rich celebrities show off their wealth with posh homes. You might drive past the singer Rhianna's house and think wow, look at that mansion, and whoa check out the cars in the drive. Not so in the ancient middle east. The way you impressed people if you were wealthy was by inviting guests over and putting on an incredible meal with far more than anyone could eat. A man's fame was spread by his lavish hospitality, not by his possessions.

To prepare a table, meant to prepare a meal. You ate your food with pieces of flat bread and didn't need to lay out utensils. Incidentally the meal was always prepared my women then and the Psalmist is not afraid to show God as the good hostess. In the same way Jesus was not afraid to tell the parable of the lost coin which uses a good woman as the God figure. Here David recognises that the Lord prepares him a banquet. He is the generous hostess, and he serves David, even though he is surrounded by enemies.

If I am surrounded by haters, and some-one shows me love in front of them, then that person will also become an object of hate. When Jesus spend the night with Zacchaeus the tax collector, the crowd that was pro-Jesus is now murmuring angrily against him. He demonstrates costly love to me regardless of who is watching. The relationship you have with Jesus is not one that you have in secret, but it is one that you have in the open, in front of those that may mock you and oppose you, and even hate you for your faith.

Once with two friends I had to walk through several kilometres of dense woodland between two African border posts late at night. I was hungry and the wild dogs eyed us and followed us. It was a bit scary. But imagine I am there but in a moon-lit clearing of this dense forest. A wooden table laid with a wonderful selection of food and drink is set out before me in the clearing, and round the edges are flaming torches which keep the animals well away. We would not

needed to worry about being attacked, or wait hungrily to heat up some scraps at the border with our meths burner. We could instead feast happily right there with predators all around us.

I love this verse. There is an eye in the storm, and it is with Jesus. No matter what is going on all around you or whoever is against you, David is telling us that thanks to the Good Shepherd, the good hostess, it is still possible to find that place of tranquillity where your soul can be restored by God and you find that place of inner peace.

The American Horatio Spafford lost his son in 1870 to scarlet fever. He invested his wealth in Real Estate and most of it along with his own home was destroyed the next year in 1871 in the Great Chicago fire. He had no insurance. In 1873 he decided to go on an evangelistic crusade to England and have a holiday there too. He had some last minute issues to deal with so he sent his wife and four daughters ahead of him. The ship collided with another ship and sank. Only his wife was rescued and made the journey there alive. He took a ship out to join his wife, and he sailed over the spot where his daughters had been lost. In that moment he penned the words to a popular hymn:-

*When peace like a river attends my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

One use of anointing was to honour some-one at a banquet. An honoured guest in the time of Jesus would be greeted with a kiss, had his feet washed, and then anointed with oil. It was a practice that went right back to ancient Egypt. This act of honour is sure to infuriate your watching enemies at this banquet. The host is pulling out all the stops to show that the guest is welcomed, honoured and beloved. As he takes a sip of wine from his cup, a waiter runs over and fills it again to the brim, so spills as he picks it up again. David knows that this treatment is extraordinary.

As we lead a life that focuses on God, as we pray and worship, and as we found space just to be in his presence, we find a God that welcomes, honours and spoils us, and will go to extra-ordinary measures to show that we are loved and accepted by him, no matter what our situation. He is the Lord of super abundance, one that turns water into 120 gallons of the finest wine, who feeds the masses from a boy's lunch-box with 12 baskets of left-overs. He is a generous God.

Surely your goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever

Going back to the Shepherd, after the days grazing, the sheep follow him back down the wilderness slopes to the sheep fold. He has to be aware because there could be a wolf or a lion following behind the flock waiting for his moment to attack. If he has an assistant he will be the rear guard. If the sheep know their way home, the shepherd himself could take up the rear.

The language assumes movement, you cannot follow some-one unless they are on the move. When I did my only 10k run I was the last of the runners, and the medical team were following close behind me in case I collapsed! In our lives at any one time we are moving in one of only two directions, towards God or away from him. David's journey had taken him through many wars and troubles, some he had brought on himself, such as the sordid affair with Bathsheba

*When peace like a river attends my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

, and yet he was able to say that goodness followed him every day of his life. Some days he chose to turn away from goodness, but as he looks back he can vividly remember the 'good' that followed him. The second thing that followed him on his journey is a mercy, grace, or loving kindness. The word used 'khesed' has two meanings, on is faithfulness to a covenant, and the other is grace that is freely offered to the undeserving.

David is saying that through his long and eventful life, with all its fears and dangers, he knows that God has been following him and supporting him out of a faithfulness to the covenant they had made, and at extending him his grace and loving kindness to his undeserving self. It is true for us too, with a sense that Jesus goes before us and also covers our back.

As David takes his journey, following the Good Shepherd, wherever he goes he senses he is in the house of God, the presence of God. God is with him during his earthly days, and as assured him a place at the eternal banquet table, a place in heaven for eternity.

God completed his work in David, and in the same way what God has started in you, he will surely continue.

Conclusion

A year later you drive back to Dartmoor, and go back to the spot where you left the sheep. On the way you notice a sheep dead in a ditch it has your branding. You get to the agreed rendezvous you had with the sheep, which is a high point on the moors and you look around with your binoculars. At first you see nothing, then you notice a movement by a clump of rocks. You go over there and you find a group of 9 sheep huddled together by the rocks. One has a damaged leg, two looked a bit traumatised but the others look good. By chance they have kept together, not gone off to far and survived the year. They've done well, and you smile, but then what of the others. You know one is dead, but have no idea what has happened to the remaining 90.

David has not left things to chance. He has declared the Lord as his Good Shepherd, and since a young man has been on that journey with God through rough and smooth. But what comes across most from the Psalm is his attitude. It feels like he is full of gratitude and joy. He is amazed at God's provision for him, and expresses his thanks through this wonderful psalm.

David is focussed on the identity of God as the Good Shepherd, not on his own circumstances. So when his circumstances change from green pastures to the valley of death, he is still able to thank God whose identity has not changed. He is still the Good Shepherd.

Everything we have is from God. Whatever circumstance we find ourselves in there is always something to give thanks for. If we are in a desperate situation and can't think of anything we have to give thanks for, we can still thank God for who he is. As described in this psalm, we can be thankful and joyful because he guides us, he protects us, he provides for us, he rescues us when we are lost, he welcomes us, he honours us, he spoils us, and within a covenant relationship of faithfulness, his goodness, grace, love and mercy follow us every day of our lives. Thankyou Jesus.

Compassion

Jesus sees a crowd, and has a heart of compassion for these lost souls. Their lives are left to chance and the odds for them are not good. The crowd is a collection of individual souls desperately needing God, needing a good shepherd. Without him, life on earth and for eternity is left to chance. Without him, the lost do not have his provision, his guidance or his protection, and will not experience the added extras that he lavishes on us. None of this is earned or deserved, it is all a gift from God, made possible by his Grace and Mercy. Jesus can see what they are missing out, and his heart is filled with compassion

As we see crowds of people we do not feel naturally compassionate. Compassion like Jesus had, is a gift, and is one worth seeking. A few weeks ago I was asked to pray for a teenage girl, who had found faith and wanted the gift of compassion like Jesus. It was quite moving to pray for her and feel the Spirit come in power.

As we reflect on what those lost without Christ are without, and on what is available to us as followers of Jesus, then it leads us naturally to prayer. So I want to finish with two prayers one for compassion, and one of thankfulness.

Prayer for Compassion:

Lord Jesus, please give me the gift of compassion. Please help me break my heart for the things that break yours. Help me have more compassion for the lost, and then demonstrate my compassion through love and generous giving. Spirit of compassion come upon me.

Prayer for thankfulness:

Thankyou Jesus for providing for us, for guiding us, protecting us. Honouring us, spoiling us, and for that faith relationship where your goodness, grace and mercy follows us every day of our lives. Help me to give thanks in all circumstances, whether in green pastures or dark valleys. Spirit of thankfulness come upon me.

Amen.