

“What Are You Trusting In?”

2 August 2020 - Led by David Boyd

Welcome & Call To Worship:

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 93 What A Faithful God

Prayers of Adoration & Confession: Winnie Wilmot

Reading: Psalm 23

Sermon:

This morning we are going to take a closer look at this psalm, probably one of the most, if not *the* most, well-known passages in the Bible. It's a firm favourite because it's a psalm that brings us comfort when we are in a dark place. It's the go-to psalm for funerals, pastoral visits to the sick, or just to comfort us when we are going through any of life's many traumas. Because of that, I think we get so wrapped up in the comfort that we can miss other aspects of this psalm that have much to say to us.

The psalm begins, "*The LORD is my shepherd.*" Immediately, the psalmist introduces us to the prime mover, "The LORD," the God of Israel. The one who made heaven and earth, who created and sustains all things. He is the focus of this psalm, in fact, as we shall see, He is the centre and purpose of the psalmist's life, because he says that this creator God, this "Lord" is my shepherd. What an amazing claim! He is saying that he has a close personal connection to this Almighty Creator; that this LORD loves and cares for him in the same way a shepherd loves and cares for his sheep.

Now, at first, it seems almost sacrilegious to talk about the Creator of the universe as a minder of sheep, but the term shepherd means much more than a simple stockman in the Bible. Shepherd could refer to an authority figure, e.g. the King was referred to as the shepherd of the people. The psalmist is using it here in the sense that it is this "Lord" to whom he swears allegiance, and it's that allegiance that defines him. It's important to note this because this LORD has said of Himself that He is a "jealous God", He will entertain no rivals.

As a result, the psalmist can say, "*I shall not want.*" I shall. Not. Lack. Anything. What the LORD gives will be enough for me. What a statement of humble trust! The psalmist is saying, "I trust Him to know what I need, even before I ask, and to provide for me." But "*I shall not want*" is also much more than a statement about God's ability to provide; it's also a statement against my own greed and covetousness. It declares that I will resist all the aggressive marketing that tells me I deserve so much more. I will not believe that my life will be somehow incomplete without their shiny, new product. The opening statement that "*the LORD is my shepherd*" precludes all these other wants and desires that take my focus away from the LORD and make me selfish, that cause me not to notice my neighbour and his needs. When it comes right down to it most of our wants are contrived, and imagined, and dreamed up by an advertising industry with a vested interest in keeping us dissatisfied with our lot, to keep us always wanting more. To realize that we are so easily influenced and manipulated by the marketeers, let us see that the analogy of shepherd and sheep is very apt. If you have ever been around sheep, then you know they are not the smartest creatures

in the world and take a fair amount of looking after. A sheep needs a shepherd, otherwise it can be very easily led astray.

The psalmist then begins to unpack the reasons why he trusts this Shepherd so completely. This Shepherd who, we have seen, is none other than the Creator of the universe.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures.” The sheep can relax because they have experienced the generous provision of their Lord. Without a shepherd like this, they would have gone hungry.

“He leads me beside quiet waters.” A good shepherd takes his sheep to a safe place where they can drink their fill, otherwise the sheep might try to drink from a fast-flowing stream where they could be swept away and drowned.

“He restores my soul.” The shepherd’s loving care takes away any anxiety the sheep might otherwise feel. The assurance of being loved allows the sheep to flourish and experience a deep sense of joy and peace.

“He guides me in paths of righteousness.” By following the shepherd’s guidance, the sheep walk on safe, straight paths. The shepherd keeps the sheep away from paths that are treacherous and dangerous, where a slip could lead to injury and even death for the sheep.

Notice that in all these things the shepherd does everything. **“He makes me lie down; He leads me; He restores me; He guides me.”** The sheep does nothing apart from receive the benefit of all this loving care. The sheep are totally dependent on the shepherd for all their needs and when they rely on him, they enjoy a safe, secure life, free from hunger, thirst, anxiety, fear and danger. Why? Because they know from previous experience that this shepherd can be trusted.

In fact, the psalmist has such complete trust in the loving care of the Shepherd that he can say, *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”* In recent months the valley of the shadow of death has become a lot more real to us. We have watched the Coronavirus sweep across our world bringing death and devastation in its wake. Isn’t it extraordinary how something that we need a very powerful microscope to see and that doesn’t even have a brain, has brought our entire civilisation to a standstill? All our illusions of independence and control shattered by a simple virus.

COVID-19 has graphically demonstrated that the things we usually depend on, the things we put our faith in, like our health system, our technology, our wealth, can let us down. Over the past few months, we have been walking through the valley of the shadow of death. We have had our doubts and fears, because these things that we have put our faith in, that we have depended on, have been exposed as the false gods that they are. Their inability to save us has been laid bare for all to see.

In contrast to that, the quiet confidence the psalmist has in the Shepherd’s ability to protect him in all situations stands out. The reason for this confidence is that he knows that he is not alone. Even as he journeys through the valley of the shadow of death, his confidence is not shaken because he says, *“for You are with me.”* The Good Shepherd has been this way many times before and the psalmist has experienced His deliverance. The Shepherd has *always* proved more than equal to the challenge.

"Your rod and Your staff" - the shepherd's instruments of guidance - *"they comfort me."* Not only are we not alone in the valley but we are guided. God's presence and His Word accompany us on the journey, not just warning us of the hazards ahead, but showing us how to navigate them.

But the Shepherd is still able to surprise us. *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."* Right there, in the place of maximum danger and threat, this generous God provides a miraculous meal. This would have reminded the psalmist's first readers of His provision for their forefathers as they journeyed through the desert. Water from the rock, manna from heaven.

And right there, in the place of maximum danger and threat, this generous God *"anoints my head with oil; my cup overflows."* Even in the valley the sheep know God's blessing. Right where they least expect it, He pours out blessing after blessing upon them so that they can say that their cup overflows. To have the LORD as your shepherd means that you have all the comforts of home wherever you are, and whatever the circumstances.

In contrast to having the LORD as our shepherd, when we go our own way then it is a very different story. As Isaiah pointed out, *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all"* (Isaiah 53:6).

When we go our own way it never ends well. In fact, we are just like sheep that break out of a field and go off on our own - at the mercy of packs of dogs or in danger of being hit by a car. If the Shepherd doesn't rescue us quickly, our prospects and life expectancy are not very good at all.

We are all at risk: we all tend to be selfish, to do the wrong thing. Just like with the Coronavirus, none of us is immune. We all need rescuing, and that is precisely why Jesus came to die on the cross. On the cross *"the LORD laid on Him the iniquity of us all,"* as Isaiah said. All the wrong things that we have done; all the mistakes that we have made in going our own way, were laid on Him and He paid the ultimate price, the price we should have paid for our iniquity.

That implies there is a choice to be made here. This psalm was not written just so we can feel all warm and fuzzy; it demands a response. If the LORD is not our Shepherd - if we reject His offer of rescue and continue to go our own way - then we end up paying the ultimate price ourselves. How much better to be like the psalmist - accept the LORD as our Shepherd, welcome His loving care and live under His blessing. But it's either one or the other, there is no middle ground. Remember what I said about Him being a jealous God, He will entertain no rivals, so it is all or nothing. We swear allegiance to Him, and only Him, or we continue on our lonely path, pleasing ourselves but ultimately doomed.

When we accept Him as our Shepherd, then the psalmist tells us *"surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."* God's loving care follows us around, it pursues us wherever we go; there will never be a time when it does not surround us. That's because God becomes our home, our dwelling place. We have been adopted into His family and He will never let us down, ever! His steadfast love will always be with us, strong and unshakeable, as we are held in the embrace of the everlasting arms.

Hymn of Reflection: IPH 527 Psalm 23 (The Lord's My Shepherd)

Prayers for Others: David Boyd

Closing Praise: You Never Let Go

Announcements

Benediction: And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all, now, and for evermore. Amen.