



Introduction

Throughout the autumn we're going to be focussing our thoughts and our worship on the God who is revealed to us through the words of Psalm 23. Each week, we shall take a different phrase from that Psalm and explore it through related Bible passages, and through doing so, I pray that each one of us will discover that a life lived without lack or fear really is possible when God is in the mix.

Today, I want to just consider the opening three words of the Psalm, "*The Lord is...*" and to ask the question, "*What's in a Name?*" so that we might begin to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and character of God by looking at the Names used of God in the Bible. First, we're going to sing a couple of songs that will help us to praise God and to think about different aspects of God's nature or character

Songs

King of kings, majesty,
God of heaven living in me.
Gentle Saviour, closest Friend,
Strong Deliverer, Beginning and End,
All within me falls at your throne.
***Your majesty, I can but bow;
I lay my all before you now.
In royal robes I don't deserve,
I live to serve your majesty.***

Earth and heaven worship you,
Love eternal, faithful and true,
Who bought the nations, ransomed souls,
brought this sinner near to your throne;
All within me cries out in praise.
***Your majesty, I can but bow;
I lay my all before you now.
In royal robes I don't deserve,
I live to serve your majesty.¹***

The splendour of the King,
clothed in majesty;
Let all the earth rejoice,
let all the earth rejoice.
He wraps himself in light
and darkness tries to hide,
And trembles at his voice,
and trembles at his voice.
***How great is our God, sing with me,
How great is our God, and all will see
How great, how great is our God.***

And age to age he stands,
and time is in his hands;
Beginning and the end,
beginning and the end.
The Godhead, Three in One,
Father, Spirit, Son,
The Lion and the Lamb,
the Lion and the Lamb.
How great is our God, sing with me...

Name above all names,
worthy of all praise;
My heart will sing:
how great is our God. x 2
How great is our God, sing with me...

¹ Jarrod Cooper, 1996 Sovereign Lifestyle Music Ltd.

As we start this series, I want to share with you the whole of **Psalm 23** as our main reading today, but I want to do so in a slightly different way. I want to use it as a meditative prayer so after each line I will add a brief thought for you to reflect upon quietly as you simply dwell in the presence of a good and gracious God. Then we shall pause briefly at the end to allow you to hold in your mind before God the phrase which most speaks to you of your experience of God or your need for God.

So I encourage you to sit comfortably, to breath easily and perhaps to close your eyes as you listen so that your focus can be solely on what God wants to say to you through these words. The following reflection is from Dallas Willard's wonderful book "Life without Lack." Let's pray:

The Lord I my Shepherd – in other words, I'm in the care of someone else. I'm not the one in charge. I've taken my kingdom and surrendered it to the kingdom of God. I am living life with God. The Lord is my shepherd. And what follows from that?

I shall not want – that's the natural result. I shall not lack anything. That's what Jesus teaches when he says: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and everything else will be given to you as well."

He makes me lie down in green pastures – what kind of a sheep lies down in green pasture? A sheep that has eaten its fill. If a sheep is in a green pasture and it's not full, it will be eating, not lying down!

He leads me beside the still waters – likewise, a sheep that is being led by still water is a sheep that is not thirsty. Jesus said to the woman at the well, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give them will never thirst. But the water that I shall give them will become in them a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."

He restores my soul – the broken depths of my soul are healed and reintegrated in a life in union with God: the eternal kind of life.

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake – the effect of the restoration of my soul is that I walk in paths of righteousness on God's behalf as a natural expression of my renewed inner nature. As I walk these paths, my trust in the Shepherd runs so deep that I can then declare:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil – a life without lack is one that carries no fear of evil. Our confidence in God soars far above wants and fears. Would you like to have a life without fear, a life of soaring faith? It seems like Jesus was constantly saying to his friends, "Fear not! Fear not!" Imagine for a moment what that would be like. No fear of life, aging or death, disease or hunger, no fear of any person or creature, not even the loss of all your possessions. It's not about not having to face the things we fear but rather being able to face them without any fear in our hearts. You can live without fear even in the midst of a world dominated by fear. Fear can be eliminated from your heart and mind. While the Psalmist clearly knows all about life's dangers, he can still say, "I will fear no evil." Why? Please say this next bit out loud with me:

For you are with me – Perhaps the central truth of the whole Bible is that the life without lack or fear, the life lived in all its fullness, is based entirely upon the presence of God in our midst. And God is most clearly and fully present to us in Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me – The rod and staff represent for us the Shepherd's strength and protective care. In this safe place where I have no fear, I am at liberty to enjoy the overwhelming generosity of my Shepherd.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies – since I love my enemies, which is what Jesus calls and equips us to do, I would not feast upon a delicious meal in their presence and leave them standing there hungry. The abundance of God's provision and safety in my life is so great, I would invite them to enjoy with me what God has prepared.

You anoint my head with oil – think for a moment of hot showers and warm fluffy towels, things that make us feel clean, comfortable, and special, made ready for God's purposes, and how God makes that possible. God is not only interested in my having something wonderful to eat, but also in blessing me with a life that is full and free and powerful in him. So much so that the abundance of God's provision rings out from the Psalmist's pen:

My cup is full! – Is that what it says? No. **My cup overflows.** I have more than my cup can possibly hold – a bottomless cup, permanent refills. So much that I can be as generous as my Shepherd without fear of ever running out. So much so that I am convinced:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever – this is a description of the eternal life available to us now in the kingdom of the heavens; the abundant with-God life that comes from following the Shepherd, where we dwell and abide with God in the fullness of his life – a life in which all the promises of Christ's gospel are realised. Because of this we have no reason to be anxious; the world is a perfectly safe place for us to be – when we are able to put our trust in God alone.³

(pause)

² Chris Tomlin, Ed Cash, & Jesse Reeves, 2004 worshiptogether.com songs/Sixsteps Music

³ Willard D, *Life without lack*, Nelson Books, 2018, P. xvii - xx

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want;
 He makes me lie in pastures green,
 He leads me by the still, still waters,
 His goodness restores my soul.

***And I will trust in you alone,
 And I will trust in you alone,
 For your endless mercy follows me,
 Your goodness will lead me home.***

He guides my ways in righteousness,
 And he anoints my head with oil;
 And my cup – it overflows with joy,
 I feast on his pure delights.

And though I walk the darkest path –
 I will not fear the evil one,
 For you are with me, and your rod and staff
 Are the comfort I need to know.⁴

Reflection

What's in a Name?

The videos can be viewed at www.burleymethodist.org

Alternatively, the written text is provided below

Prayer

Let us pray: "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear! It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds, and drives away our fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole and calms the troubled breast; 'tis manna to the hungry soul, and to the weary, rest.

Dear name – the rock on which I build, my shield and hiding-place, my never-failing treasury, filled with boundless stores of grace!

Jesus! My Shepherd, Brother, Friend, my Prophet, Priest and King, my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought; but when I see thee as thou art, I'll praise thee as I ought.

'Till then I would thy love proclaim with every fleeting breath; and may the music of the Name refresh my soul in death.⁵

Dear Lord, we pray today for all those who live in want or fear, those who have no one to share the burdens that they face with, those who struggle just to face each day, those whose lives are blighted by mental, physical or emotional ill-health, those who are facing the prospect of death. Be their Shepherd. Be their Lord. Be their sufficiency. Be their hope. Be their peace.

We pray for all those who are facing a new beginning at this time with all the mixed emotions of excitement and anxiety that can bring. We pray for teachers and children going back to school, for university staff and students embarking on a new term with all the uncertainties that Covid precautions bring. We pray for all those Ministers starting new appointments this week with limited opportunities to get to know their new congregations and communities. We pray for all those going back to their workplace for the first time and those with no workplace to go to. Be their Shepherd. Be their Lord. Be their sufficiency. Be their hope. Be their peace.

We pray for our churches, our church leaders and church councils as they seek to discern the best ways forward during these strange times and we pray for those who are longing to return to physical worship in church buildings and for those who are anxious about doing so. Be our Shepherd. Be our Lord. Be our sufficiency. Be our hope. Be our peace.

All these prayers, and the unspoken prayers of our hearts we offer to you in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together saying:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

⁴ Stuart Townend, 1996, Thankyou Music.

⁵ John Newton, 1725 – 1807.

We end our time of worship together as we sing one of the great hymns of our faith declaring something of the majesty and mystery of our God: *Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon the throne.*

Hymn

Crown him with many crowns,
the Lamb upon his throne.
Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns
all music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing
of him who died for thee,
And hail him as thy matchless King
through all eternity.

Crown him the Son of God,
before the worlds began;
And ye who tread where he has trod,
crown him the Son of Man,
Who every grief has known
that wrings the human breast,
And takes and bears them for his own,
that all in him may rest.

Crown him the Lord of life,
who triumphed o'er the grave,
And rose victorious in the strife
for those he came to save.
His glories now we sing,
who died, and rose on high;
Who died, eternal life to bring,
and lives, that death may die.

Crown him the Lord of peace,
whose power a sceptre sways
From pole to pole, that wars may cease,
absorbed in prayer and praise.
His reign shall know no end,
and round his pierced feet
Fair flowers of paradise extend
their fragrance ever sweet.

Crown him the Lord of love;
behold his hands and side –
Rich wounds, yet visible above,
in beauty glorified.
All hail, Redeemer, hail!
For thou hast died for me;
Thy praise and glory shall not fail
throughout eternity.⁶

Blessing

May the blessing of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be with you this day and for evermore. Amen.

⁶ Matthew Bridges and Godfrey Thring.

Reflection: What's in a Name?

Rev Tim Perkins

Psalm 23 is not just one of the most familiar passages of the Bible it is also one of our world's greatest pieces of literature. It has been hugely valued by countless people ever since it was written over 3000 years ago! It is probably read at funeral services more than any other piece of literature and yet it is not primarily about death or eternal life. It continues to bring comfort, hope, and peace to people today and my prayer is that as we explore this text, we will discover afresh the depth and intimacy of relationship with God that David himself knew.

And David sets the context for that relationship with the first sentence of his Psalm, *"The Lord is my Shepherd."* We shall consider next week something of what it means for God to be our Shepherd, but David doesn't start with the image of the Shepherd. He starts with the nature of God by using the name of God, *The Lord*. *"The Lord...is my Shepherd."*

You may have heard me say before that in the Bible names aren't just given because a parent happens to like that name for their child. They had much greater significance. Names meant something and often what they meant gave you an insight into the person's character. So, to know a person's name was to know something important about them, to understand who they are and what they are like. And it is the same with God. The names that are used of God in the Bible tell us some particularly important things about God's character and nature and how God relates to us. David starts his Psalm by addressing God as *The Lord*. This is the most common name or title applied to God in the Bible and we'll explore it more in a moment. But just as an illustration of the meaning of names I want to share with you the words of a song that I learned when I was in Sunday school 40 years ago. It's called *Jehovah Jireh*. The name *Jehovah* is one translation of the word David used for *the Lord* in his Psalm. The words say this:

"Jehovah Jireh, God will provide, Jehovah Rophe, God heals; Jehovah M'keddesh, God who sanctifies, Jehovah Nissi, God is my banner.

*Jehovah Rohi, God my Shepherd, Jehovah Shalom, God is peace; Jehovah Tsidkenu, God our righteousness, Jehovah Shammah, God who is there."*⁷

These are all names given to God in the Bible. Can you see already how they tell us so much about the nature of God – God who provides and heals, God who sanctifies and protects, God who shepherds us and is the source of peace, God who brings us into a right relationship with him and who is always present with us. The song is an easy way of reminding ourselves who God is and how God relates to us!

The two main names that come to us in the Old Testament for God are *Elohim* and *Yahweh*. *Elohim* reveals to us something of God's great creative and governing power and is used throughout Genesis 1, amongst other places. *Yahweh* is a name which was never verbalised by the Israelites because it was so special to them. Instead, when speaking the name of God, they took the consonants from the name *Yahweh* but added in the vowels from another name for God, *Adonai*, which then gave them the word *Jehovah* to speak of God. It is this word *Yahweh* or *Jehovah* with which David introduces God to us. It has the primary sense of a being who is self-subsistent, or who does not depend on anything or anyone else for their very being. In John 5:26 when Jesus speaks of his Father, he describes him as *"the One who has life in himself."* God simply exists and is pure energy. Everything else in existence depends upon something else or someone else for their existence, and ultimately upon God.

In Genesis 15 Abraham uses the third name for God I have mentioned *Adonai*, which has a personal, possessive sense of *my Lord* and it is often used in the Bible in conjunction with *Yahweh*. So, *Yahweh Adonai* describes a personal, covenant-making God who holds people as his friends. But then two chapters later in Genesis 17 God identifies himself to Abraham as *El Shaddai* – the *Almighty God*, all-powerful and all-abundant to his people. The progressive self-revelation of God to the people of Israel throughout the Old Testament adds layer upon layer to our understanding of God's nature.

We heard Viv last week speak about Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush and how he dared to ask God who he should say was sending him to the Israelites in captivity to Egypt and God responded to the question with the somewhat puzzling statement: *"I am that I am."* And this is where God reveals his name as *Yahweh*. I guess to get a bit of a sense of what it actually means, it might well be the closest Hebrew word to what Shakespeare had in mind when he penned those immortal words for Hamlet, *"To be or not to be, that is the question."* You see *Yahweh* is not just a name like Charlie or Bill, or Mary or Ruth. *I am* is a statement of the nature of God as *being!* – self-sustaining, self-sufficient, self-determined, all-powerful being. *I am that I am* means *My being sustains my being*. It is something that only God can say.

I wonder if you've ever tried to finish the sentence "The Lord is..." for yourself? What is God or who is God for you? For David, perhaps because of his upbringing and context, the first thing he says is *"The Lord is my Shepherd."* We'll look at that more next week. Why don't you have a go at finishing the sentence for yourself?

I'm going to share with you an offering from the 19th century Methodist theologian Adam Clarke. Don't worry, your version doesn't need to be as grand or full of big words as this, but I think it does give us some small sense of the immensity of the One who is our Lord and Shepherd. Clarke describes God like this:

"The eternal, independent, and self-existent Being: The Being whose purposes and actions spring from himself, without foreign motive or influence: He who is absolute in dominion; the most pure, the most simple, the most spiritual of all essences; infinitely benevolent, beneficent, true and holy: The cause of all being, the upholder of all things; infinitely happy, because infinitely perfect; and eternally self-sufficient, needing nothing that he has made; illimitable in his immensity, inconceivable in his mode of existence, and indescribable in his essence; known fully

⁷ Ian Smale, Copyright 1987 Thankyou Music.

only by himself, because an infinite mind can only be comprehended by itself. In a word, a Being who, from his infinite wisdom, cannot err or be deceived; and, from his infinite goodness, can do nothing but what is eternally just, right, and kind.”⁸

This is the God who lives not far off somewhere in a distant corner of the universe but in the real world, in our real world, in the most real world which only exists because God inhabits it and upholds it. *Yahweh, the Lord*, the great *I am*, is present and available and actively involved in the lives of those who know and trust him. And God has chosen to reveal himself most fully to the world through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, *Immanuel, God with us*. And it is this presence of God with us in daily life that St John most wants to describe in his repeated use of the divine name *Yahweh* in his Gospel, or it least its Greek equivalent *ego eimi, I am*. “*I am the light of the world.*” “*I am the bread of life.*” “*I am the resurrection and the life.*” “*I am the way, the truth and the life.*” “*I am the gate for the sheep.*” “*I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.*” Simply, yet magnificently, *I Am*. God Incarnate. God present and accessible. God good and beautiful and generous.

The words of one other song I learned in Sunday school say this:

“El Shaddai, El Shaddai, El Elyon na Adonai, age to age you’re still the same by the power of the Name.

El Shaddai, El Shaddai, erkamka na Adonai, we will praise and lift you high. El Shaddai.

Through your love and through the ram you saved the son of Abraham; through the power of your hand, turned the sea into dry land. To the outcast on her knees you were the God who really sees, and by your might you set your people free.

Through the years you made it clear that the time of Christ was near, though the people couldn’t see what Messiah ought to be. Though your word contained the plan, they just could not understand your most awesome work was done through the frailty of your Son.”⁹

The ancient French Saint and theologian Paternus, once wrote this in his “*Advice to a Son*,” “*First of all, my child, think magnificently of God. Magnify his providence; adore his power, pray to him frequently and incessantly. Bear him always in your mind. Teach your thoughts to reverence him in every place for there is no place where he is not. Therefore, my child, fear and worship and love God; first and last, think magnificently of him!*”¹⁰

“The Lord is...my Shepherd.” Amen.

⁸ Adam Clarke, *Christian Theology* (London: Thomas Tegg & Son, 1835), P. 66.

⁹ John Thompson & Michael Card, Copyright 1981 Whole Armor & Full Armor Publishing Companies/Adm. By TKO Publishing Ltd.

¹⁰ Quoted in Willard D, *Life without Lack*, Nelson Books, 2018, P. 24.