

## Thought for 17<sup>th</sup> January 2021

In understanding scripture, the two biggest mistakes you can make are firstly to try and make scripture say what you want it to say and secondly to make scripture fit our 21<sup>st</sup> Westerner view of the world. So, this morning we are going to try understand the Psalm as David meant it to be understood. David's experiences of being a shepherd as a young boy allowed him to speak authoritatively about the relationship of shepherd to sheep and sheep to shepherd. God used David's experience of shepherding to communicate several important truths about His relationship to His people.

Last week we saw that the shepherd's life was all about his sheep. We saw that the shepherd cared for his sheep. We saw that the shepherd knew and understood His sheep as individuals and even had an affection for them. We saw that the shepherd would defend the sheep no matter the cost even to laying down his life for them. Finally, we saw that the shepherd's sole purpose was to give life to his sheep, even life in abundance. The essential idea or image of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is of God caring for and providing for His people.

As we also saw last week the sheep's life was all about the shepherd, that to survive and thrive the sheep had to trust and follow the shepherd. A sheep that doesn't trust the shepherd certainly will not thrive and would almost certainly die.

The most important thing in the sheep's life was the relationship with the shepherd. It is this relationship that leads the sheep to follow the shepherd. For us Westerners shepherding is all about shepherds herding and driving sheep. This is most commonly illustrated by the shepherds use of sheepdogs to force the sheep to do the shepherds bidding. Eastern shepherding was different, the sheep choose to follow the shepherd out of choice, they are neither coerced nor forced into following the shepherd. When David writes "*The Lord is my Shepherd*" he is choosing of his own free will to make the Lord his Shepherd and to follow Him wherever He may lead. It is a conscious choice; it is not a choice forced on David.

So why does David choose to follow the Lord, well he gives us the reason in the next part of his opening line, when he writes, "*I lack nothing*". This is also why the sheep

choose to follow the shepherd because they know the shepherd will provide all they need food, water, protection and care. David could look at his own life and see how God had already provided for him, cared for him, protected him and guided him. David could also look to God's promises to him and trust that God would continue to care and provide for him. You could paraphrase David's opening line to "I will choose to follow the Lord because He will provide everything I could ever need."

David chose to look to the Lord for his provision and care against a backdrop of great pain, grief and hardship in his own life. You might think that David is perhaps misguided and deluded in choosing to follow the Lord given the hardship in his life. However, if you read the rest of his Psalm and understand it in the way he intended you will see David is no misguided fool or deluded dupe but a hard-nosed realist. The next three verses detail how the Lord, or the Good Shepherd leads David, not through a rose garden or verdant green fields but through the harsh and testing desert of life.

*"He makes me lie down in green pastures"*, doesn't this phrase conjure the image of sheep blissfully lying-in waist deep verdant grass snacking lazily away. Well remember when I said that one of the biggest mistakes in understanding scripture is to look at it through 21<sup>st</sup> Western eyes. The green pastures David was writing about were actually the stony, broken and arid hillsides of Judea. The video we saw earlier with the young people reading the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is filmed in the very area David was a shepherd. These desert hillsides capture a little moisture from the westerly winds of the Mediterranean each evening. This moisture allows a few green plants to grow at the base of rocks that gives the wilderness regions the nickname, "green pastures". The shepherd leads the sheep along these hillsides so that they can find these sparse patches of greenery. The sheep have to keep following the shepherd from one tuft of sustenance to another as each patch of green only provides a few mouthfuls of food. Please note it is only the shepherd who knows where the best "green pastures" are to be found. Finally, it is only after following the Shepherd along the hillside and having eaten their fill can the sheep lie down, rest and start to chew the cud. So, the image David is using here is not fat sheep lying in verdant green pastures. No, the image here is one where the shepherd has led his sheep to sufficient food that they can lie down and chew the cud in an arid desert. For David and the people of his time the image here is one of sufficiency and rest in the midst of a hostile and barren landscape.

Those of us who follow the Good Shepherd can know that in even in the most hostile and barren time of our lives He will provide for us and give us rest. The image of this Psalm is not God will take all your cares away but rather he will provide and care for you in the midst of those cares. Nowhere is Scripture does God promise to wave a magic wand and make your problems disappear what God does promise is to be with us always, in all seasons and to provide and care for. The message of Psalm 23 is God is my sufficiency and His sufficiency mean I will lack nothing.

It bares emphasising here, that the shepherd is with the sheep on those arid, broken and baking hillsides sharing in the struggle of his sheep. As Jesus, the Good Shepherd said I will never leave or forsake you. The image of God in David's Psalm is not one of a distant God seated in heaven looking down and shouting orders. No, the image is of God leading and caring for His people personally. David knew God's presence with him even in the most difficult of times, even in the best of times.

David continues with "*He leads me beside quiet waters,*". Whilst sheep can exist on the moisture in grass on the hillsides for days there comes a time when they will need to drink fresh clean water. So, the shepherd leads them down from the arid hillsides to the deep valleys where the only water is to be found. The water is found in either deep wells the shepherd has dug and requires the shepherd to draw it out for the sheep or in natural springs.

The problem is that many of these springs are in deep ravines where the sheep could easily fall into the water and as we saw last week sheep would not make Olympic class swimmers and so very likely drown. Also, many of these desert springs were too salty or fouled which meant if the sheep drank from them, they would quickly become ill. So, the sheep depended on the shepherd's knowledge of where the wells were or where the springs that the sheep could drink from in safety were. Again, we have the idea of God understanding His people's needs, making preparations to care for them and leading them to safely to where they can find all they need for life.

Last week we finished with David's opening line to Psalm 23 "*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing*" and David's amazing assertion that because the Lord is his shepherd,

he will lack nothing. This week we saw why David could write his amazing claim that he would lack nothing because his shepherd, the Lord would provide it for him.

David lacked nothing because he recognised the Shepherd's voice and then chose to follow and trust the shepherd would meet his needs.

Is this our experience as Believers of God's provision and care the same as David's? If we as Believers don't experience God's care and provision, why not? Well can I suggest a few reasons. Perhaps we lack because we as Believers often fail to recognise the Good Shepherd's voice and simply follow any old voice? Perhaps we lack because when we do recognise the Good Shepherd's voice, we ignore it because there are so many other more seductive voices that are easier to follow calling out to us? Perhaps we lack because we fail to trust the Good Shepherd and look to our own efforts to provide? Perhaps it is no wonder that we are so lacking.

To my shame I fail so often to follow my Shepherd's. I so often listen to others' voices rather than His. I so often rely on my ability to provide rather than my Shepherd's. Oh, what a terrible sheep I am. But fear not, if you like me are a sheep that struggles to follow the shepherd there is hope. David goes on to recognise in his Psalm that the Good Shepherd is all about rescuing and restoring those sheep that have gone astray. Next week we will look at God's restoration of the errant sheep and His continuing great provision in His people's life.

In the meantime, I have a challenge for you, why not take time this week to listen for the Shepherd's voice and choose to follow Him, trusting that the Good Shepherd will care and provide for you. Let's remember that the Good Shepherd is with us always even in the desert. Go on give it a try and who knows next week you may have a testimony of how the Good Shepherd cared and provided for you this week.