

Thought 31st January 2021

Welcome, we are going to continue our journey through the 23rd Psalm this week. David wrote the 23rd Psalm in later life and in it he reflects on God's care for him during all the days of his life. David remembers the care and provision that God lavished on him; David remembers the times he failed God and needed God to save and restore him and David remembers how God led him through all the dark times in his life. David uses the image of the shepherd to illustrate the relationship that God has had with him throughout his life. David sees God as a gentle determined shepherd who leads him throughout his life caring for, providing for and restoring him.

Last week we saw how David knew that God's care and provision wasn't just for his earthly needs but for the entirety of his being. David realised that God care and provision extended into all parts of his life and made new, restored all of his life to the way God meant to be. David realised God was interested in restoring, refreshing and healing every part of him. This idea of God being concerned about all of the person is also seen in verses from **Psalm 103: 2 - 4** "*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy...*" God wants to restore you as He restored David.

This morning we are going to look at another way God restores David and his people, that's you and me by leading in paths of righteousness. So, what are these paths of righteousness that David writes about?

Firstly, the image behind David's words are, as often with Psalm 23, born from his experiences as a shepherd. David would have been familiar with the very steep and precipitous Judean hillsides on which he shepherded his sheep. These hillsides were crisscrossed with narrow winding paths worn into the hillside through countless years by the coming and going of sheep following their shepherd. These were the paths that David led his sheep along which led down into the valleys so the sheep could find water or led up on to the tops of the hills where the sheep could find the best grazing. So, these paths of righteousness were the routes which the shepherd led his sheep along to food and water. Therefore these paths of righteousness that David talks about

are the ways that God leads His people to His receive His care and provision. They are the right and only way to reach God's provision, care and restoration for us.

For David and for us we have to trust that Good Shepherd is leading us along the righteous paths not to restrict our choice or be a cosmic killjoy but because they are the only paths that lead to His promises for us. There are no other paths that lead to His promises, in fact all other paths lead only to suffering and death.

Secondly, the original Hebrew text contains the idea of these paths of righteousness being long and circuitous as they meandered their way across the steep Judean hillsides. The shepherd could not lead his sheep straight up or down the steep and treacherous slopes of the hills, to do so would risk injury and death for the sheep. Also, the Judean hillsides were crisscrossed by a myriad of path, some dangerous and leading nowhere or other to treacherous cliffs. Other paths, if followed, would lead the sheep near caves where bears or lions lived and therefor put them in danger. The shepherd had to know where he was going and the best way to get there, otherwise he could be leading the sheep in to hunger, thirst and even death. Thus, the shepherd would lead the sheep, along these winding paths, sometime apparently in the opposite direction to his final destination. There was no short cut for the sheep they just had to follow the shepherd as he chose the right path that would lead them to all they needed for life.

For all who follow the Good Shepherd, Jesus, it can appear sometimes that we are wandering aimlessly through life. We can feel, that although we are following the Good Shepherd we are actually getting further and further from His promises of care, protection and restoration. Sometimes we feel that the paths of righteousness have gone through some dark and barren places. David addresses this later in the 23rd Psalm and we will have a look at what he says about the dark valleys in a few minutes.

David then tags on a funny little line "*for His name's sake*". In this line David explains why God is determined to shepherd His people. Three weeks ago, we saw how the Hebrew word for shepherd could mean someone who cares for sheep. We also saw that the same word could also mean to have affection for or friendship with someone or something. God's primary reason for shepherding us is because He loves us with

passion we cannot begin to fathom. A bit like my farmer friend who delighted in telling me how horrible sheep are but spoke with affection about his sheep. Despite all the trouble that sheep were to John, I was always amazed by how many sheep he had on his farm. I think John's affection for sheep, despite all their problems is a great illustration of God's love for us.

But there is more than just affection that motivates God to shepherd His sheep, that is care, provide and restore His people. God is motivated to care for His people because that is what He has promised to do. We read of God's promise to care and provide for His people in **Genesis 12: 2 – 3**. *“God determined to call out a special people for Himself, and through that special people He would bless the whole world. The Lord tells Abram,*

*“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you”*

God's promise here is actually more a legal contract called a covenant than just a simple promise. Here God enters into a binding legal agreement to care and provide for His people. What is remarkable is the fact this is a one-sided contract where God promises to bless His people and they don't have to do anything to receive this blessing. You could say that God sets out to bless His people whether they want to be blessed or not. Like I said last week God is determined to bless your socks off.

God says in Exodus that he wants His care for His people to show to them and the whole world that He is the one true God. The way God cares for His people is the testimony of who He is to the whole world, a kind of seal of His authenticity if you will. You see being the Good Shepherd matters so deeply to God. God would never act like the Iranian shepherds we heard of last week that left their sheep so that they could

have breakfast, no it matters far too much to Him, literally God had put his reputation is on the line in how He cares for His people.

This determination to care and provide for His people, to shepherd them and love them is the surety of our faith. We can trust that God will care for, provide for and restore us because he loves us, because He has promised he will and because it matters to Him that He continues to witness to us and all the world that He is all He claims to be.

David then picks up a new thought in his Psalm, that the paths of righteousness will lead through the valley of the shadow of death. Here David is thinking about the shepherd leading the sheep through those narrow winding ravines with precipitous sides that even in the middle of the day don't receive direct sunlight. They are constraining dark places where you can't see more than a few yards and there is the constant fear of attack by lion or bear or brigand. These are the dark places that the shepherd leads his flock through to reach the green pastures or refreshing water for the sheep.

David acknowledges that following the shepherd along paths of righteousness will inevitably lead to these dark valleys. For all those who follow the shepherd they will experience dark valleys where life's journey is difficult and it feels like the darkness is closing in around you and fear and anxiety dogs your every footstep. We all experience those dark valleys where we can't see where the shepherd is leading and doubts creep in and our faith in the shepherd begins to crumble. Dark valleys are inevitable as the shepherd lead us on the paths of righteousness.

But take note that David and all those who journey in the dark valleys, these dark valleys are not your final destination you are simply passing through them. The shepherd will lead you through the darkness of the valley on the paths of righteousness to a place where you can experience all of his care, provision and restoration.

David experienced many dark valleys in his journey with God. David's life is full of times where he felt the darkness pressing in a round him. David knew what it was to not be able to see the way ahead. But David as he says in his Psalm chose not to fear the darkness, no David choses to trust in his Shepherd, God almighty. David

didn't trust in his strength or intellect or luck the pass through the darkness. No David chose to trust in the shepherd, to trust the shepherd's protection and to trust that although he could not see the way the shepherd knew where he was leading him through the darkness into the Green Pastures of His provision, care and restoration.

So even as David did in his dark times let us trust the Good Shepherd and continue to follow Him along the paths of righteousness wherever they may lead.

Let us pray, Father God fill our journey this week with faith in the Good Shepherd. We read in **Hebrews 11: 1** *"Now faith is the assurance of what we hope for and the certainty of what we do not see."* So, give us the assurance that you are with us and the certainty that you are leading us to your blessings. Amen