**The Lord is my shepherd**  20/5/23 dkm

Read: Psalm 23, John 10:1-16

Text: Psalm 23

Psalms: 122old, 84, 23old, 134a

Psalm 23 is among the most popular yet profound portions of Scripture. It is sung at funerals, at weddings, and in public and private worship. It is known as the ‘shepherd psalm’ for obvious reasons; David declares, ‘The Lord is my shepherd’. David himself was a shepherd boy who looked after his father’s sheep. Each morning he would lead the sheep out of the pen where they were housed at night. A shepherd boy in India kept his flock of goats on the roof of his house at night! David led the sheep out to the fields where they could graze. He would lead them to a spring to drink water. Sheep don’t need much water but they do need some.

Sheep, especially lambs, are vulnerable to wild animals. Animals like lions and bears were around where David lived (1Sam17:37), but here in Australia dingoes and wild dogs attack grazing sheep. The shepherd’s job was to protect the sheep from wild animals. To do this he carried a rod or club in his belt, and a staff in his hand. With this background, David the poet came up with this beautiful picture of the Lord as his shepherd.

Jesus adopted this shepherd picture himself when he declared, ‘I am the good shepherd’ in John 10:11. He goes on to speak of his sheep knowing his voice and following him. Jesus knew as much about shepherding as David! Jesus extended the picture a bit further than David when he declared, ‘The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep’. In picturing the Lord as his shepherd, David leaves us in no doubt that the good shepherd will not only provide for him, and protect him, but will in the end bring him safely into his presence forever. The last two verses of this psalm extend the shepherd metaphor to the reality of the Lord taking his people into his presence for ever. Our subheadings are: ‘He leads me’, ‘He is with me’ and, ‘He takes me to his home’.

**1. He leads me**

Sheep are timid creatures, and in my estimation stupid creatures. I grew up with cattle which went out the gate when it was opened. But not sheep- open the gate and they just run past it again and again until one suddenly sees it and they all follow in a flash. Sheep have to be led out. As human beings we like to think we are independent and not easily led. But what happens when a crowd starts to gather? We flock to see what’s going on! If everyone is walking one way we think we should walk the same way- right? Who is ready to stand against the crowd, against popular opinion?

There is nothing wrong with following a leader of course, as long as that leader is going in the right way. As the good shepherd, Jesus leads us in the right way. If he is ready to lay down his life for the sheep he must be a good shepherd. Jesus warned of hired men who do not care for the sheep (John 10:13). It is amazing how many Christian leaders teach: ‘Do as I say, not as I do’. It is amazing how cult leaders will lead their followers to their death while they themselves stay alive! We must be careful who we follow! We do not have to follow any human being when we have Jesus, who will never leave us or forsake is (Heb 13:5).

This psalm has been classified as a psalm of trust or confidence. With the Lord as his shepherd, David knew he lacked no good thing. The shepherd knew all his needs and was able and willing to provide all his needs. Is this your experience since becoming a follower of Christ Jesus? Be careful to distinguish between needs and greeds. If the psalmist could envy the prosperity of the wicked, so can we (Ps 73:3). While most sheep follow, some wander off thinking they know a place of greener pasture. Such thinking demonstrates a lack of trust in the shepherd.

The good shepherd knows where to find green pasture and lead his sheep to this place. David pictures the sheep lying down in this pasture, presumably after they have satisfied their needs. Actually, he pictures himself as being satisfied and content with the Lord as his shepherd. The Lord leads him beside still waters. The Lord has supplied his need for food and water, supplied his every physical need, so he can rest. He can rest secure in the care of the shepherd. He casts every care upon him because he cares for his sheep (1Peter 5:7).

The sheep is content with its physical needs being taken care of. We have physical needs which the Lord knows and which he takes care of (Phil 4:19). But unlike sheep, we also have emotional and spiritual needs because we have a soul. We need love, we need hope, and we need a future (Jer 29:11). The Lord is able and willing to supply the needs of our soul as well as our body. ‘He restores my soul’ and, ‘He leads me in paths of righteousness’. These paths are set by the Lord; he is the righteous one. If you visit a dairy farm you will find cow tracks going in all directions from the dairy. Cows walk behind one another as they go up for milking, and the scoop of tasty meal waiting them. If, as a boy I got lost, I would follow one of these tracks home.

While the Lord leads us to green pastures and still waters that we may satisfy our needs and find rest for our soul, he does so ultimately for his name’s names sake (23:3). ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’ (Shorter Catechism Q1). He wants us to enjoy what he gives us, and to give him thanks and praise. If the sheep are contented in following the good shepherd, other sheep will be attracted to following this shepherd. ‘Other sheep I have which are not of this fold’ (John 10:16).

Are you happy and contented and praising the Lord as one of his sheep? Are you praising the Lord Jesus such that people around you are asking, ‘How come you are so happy and contented; what path are you walking in life?’ I had an uncle whose wife spent most of her life in and out of the mental hospital. But I never saw him depressed and never heard him utter a word of bitterness. He attracted many to following the good shepherd with him.

**2. He is with me**

The psalm moves from the Lord ‘leading me’ to the Lord being ‘with me’ (23:4). In fact, it becomes a personal, ‘You are with me’ rather than, ‘He leads me’. This change occurs in the context of walking ‘through the valley of the shadow of death’ (23:4). The shepherd is still leading the flock but the path goes through a deep valley or ravine. In such a place the dangers are great; wild animals lurk in such places. The sheep become fearful, so the shepherd draws them closer to himself. The shepherd of course, has his rod and his staff to fight off any wild animals that appear. The rod or club was used to dispatch a lion or bear. The staff was also useful in defence, but its special uses was to ‘hook’ a sheep and rescue it from danger. David knew the Lord as his protector. He went off to fight Goliath in the name of the Lord, confident that the Lord would deliver him, just as he had delivered his sheep from wild animals with his rod and his staff (1Sam 17:45).

‘I will fear no evil; for you are with me’ is not just about wild animals or giants. David was aware of spiritual attacks, attacks from Satan, the enemy of our souls. The Lord allowed Satan to attack his servant Job, but not kill him. Job was powerless to defend himself against such attack. He had to trust in the Lord with great patience. Job experienced the reality of the shadow of death, as do all the Lord’s servants at some time in their life. In the end that shadow becomes the reality of death, but even here the Lord is with us, never to leave us or forsake us. What can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord? Nothing, not even death (Rom 8:38, 39).

Our shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, has experienced death and in his resurrection has conquered death. He overcame the ultimate weapon of Satan. In Christ we have also overcome death: ‘Where, O death, is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1Cor 15:55, 56). Do you find comfort in this wonderful truth? David did!

**3. He takes me home**

The last two verses of this psalm do not seem to fit the picture of a shepherd leading his flock; David seems to move on from this picture. From the shepherd ‘leading’ to the shepherd or Lord being ‘with me’, we now come to, ‘goodness and mercy shall follow me’ (23:6). The picture becomes that of a table set in the presence of the Lord; yes, in the presence of my enemies’ but the Lord is also there to ‘anoint my head with oil’ (23:5). The picture is that of a banquet with the psalmist, who was like a sheep, now being like the guest at a never ending banquet in the house of the Lord. David loved going up to the house of the Lord because there he found rest, and his soul was restored (Ps 122, 84). Do you not find the same when come into the house of the Lord to worship him?

The provision and protection of the shepherd becomes joy and assurance in the house of the Lord. Having the Lord as my shepherd is much the same thing as being in the house of the Lord- it is just that the picture is different. Our souls find rest when in the presence of the Lord, which is why we, as believers, are eager to be in the presence of the Lord. As I often say, if you don’t like being in the Lord’s house praising him each Lord’s day, why do you look forward to heaven, to being in the Lord’s presence singing his praises 24/7?

Trusting in the Lord, David was assured that goodness and mercy would follow him all the days of his life. God is good and does good (Ps 119:68). Goodness is one of his many attributes, as listed in question 4 of the Shorter Catechism. We do not know what goodness is apart from the Lord. The word ‘mercy’ translates the Hebrew word ‘*chesed*’, otherwise translated as steadfast love or covenant love.

The picture here in the last two verses fits that of the sealing of the covenant God makes with his people, the covenant he declares as: ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’. He established a close personal relationship with those he chose; this psalm is a very personal psalm. Eating together points to close fellowship. When David wanted to bless Mephibosheth what did he do? He brought him to eat at his table. David is not exactly eating with his enemies in this psalm! They are present as captives not as guests.

In one sense this is a victory celebration. David has conquered even death itself and is seated at the table of the Lord, at the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9). He is seated as a special guest after the Lord has anointed his head with oil, and his cup is filled to overflowing (23:5). You may have experienced being a special guest and having your plate continually being filled with food! David looks to the time when he finishes the race and he sits down at the table of the Lord for ever.

We referred to the covenant love of the Lord. Such love is undeserving but it is steadfast and unfailing. The Lord does not break the covenant he makes in the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, Jesus was at the table having intimate fellowship with his chosen disciples when he declared, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you’ (Luke 22:20). These words are very personal. Jesus shed his blood for you! You can be assured of dwelling in the presence of the Lord forever. David was!

David knew he was special in the eyes of the Lord, with a table prepared for him in the presence of the Lord, the Lord of lords, and King of kings. Do you know how special you are in the eyes of the Lord? If you know that Jesus loves you so much that he went to the cross for you, you will know how precious you are in his sight. You will know that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for you, and is coming again to receive you, yes you, unto himself, that where he is there you may be also (John 14:3). This is the promise David knew and believed when he wrote this psalm: ‘I will dwell in the house of the Lord’, literally ‘for length of days’ but meaning ‘forever’.