



'Hymns We Love' series: The Lord is my Shepherd

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The Lord is My Shepherd (23rd Psalm)

*1 The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;
he makes me down to lie
in pastures green; he leadeth me
the quiet waters by.*

*2 My soul he doth restore again,
and me to walk doth make
within the paths of righteousness,
e'en for his own name's sake.*

*3 Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale,
yet will I fear none ill,
for thou art with me; and thy rod
and staff me comfort still.*

*4 My table thou hast furnished
in presence of my foes;
my head thou dost with oil anoint,
and my cup overflows.*

*5 Goodness and mercy all my life
shall surely follow me;
and in God's house forevermore
my dwelling place shall be.*

Reflection

The hymn 'Amazing Grace' talks about how God lavishes us with his extraordinary love, grace, and hope, giving us so much more than we could ever deserve and so much more than we could have ever dreamed of. However, if we are honest, there are times in all our lives, and never more so than in this current crisis, when we may not feel "very lavished" when love, hope and grace feel a long, long way away.



For every one of us there will be times in our journey through life that are difficult and full of pain, and ever more so as we get older: Failing health, loneliness and isolation, the death of friends and loved ones, the fear of own death and future. These are all very real challenges that we will face at some point, and for 3,000 years in such times of struggle, people have turned to Psalm 23, for comfort, guidance and support.

The hymn 'The Lord's My Shepherd' is actually just a 17th Century translation of the original Hebrew scriptures. The Psalm itself was written by King David of Israel, about 1,000 years before Jesus was born. David was the greatest King Israel ever had, he was powerful, victorious in battle and loved by his people. He was the 25 x great grandfather of Joseph, the father of Jesus and, as well as being king, was a significant spiritual leader.

But David wasn't always a sophisticated, handsome, psalm writing king. He started life as shepherd boy, looking after his father's sheep. This psalm draws on all his experience as a shepherd following the journey through a year in the life of a shepherd and his sheep.

It starts at home, where the sheep can relax in green pastures, feeding beside still waters, where every need is carefully supplied, and the sheep are safe and well fed. But as the summer heat comes, the grass withers and streams dry out, so the shepherd needs to lead his sheep up into the mountains to the high pastures, where the grass is better. And the journey there, through the dark valleys, up the mountainsides can be hazardous with wolves, bears and lions to fend off.

But when the sheep get to the high plateaus or table lands as they are called, they will find the shepherd has already prepared the grass for them, and it will sustain them through the hot summer, while the shepherd will protect them from predators with his rod and staff. Then, once summer turns to autumn, the shepherd will lead his sheep back home for the winter months and back to safety. And in the same way God, our Good Shepherd, looks after us....

Let's notice 3 things.

Firstly, the good shepherd daily cares for and protects his sheep. Secondly, the good shepherd travels every step of the journey with his sheep. And finally, the good shepherd leads his sheep back to his home where they are safe and looked after for ever.

The book of Isaiah says "[God] tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart" This is exactly the picture of daily love and care that David sees as he writes this psalm. God is his Shepherd and He is our shepherd. He created and redeemed you and I. He loves us as his own, just like the shepherd owns and cares for his sheep. But just as God is like the shepherd, so we are like sheep and often in need of some shepherding!



Of all domesticated animals, sheep are the least able to look after themselves. They have no defence against predators, they cannot find their own food, they are susceptible to endless bugs and infections. They can't even shed their own fur without the help of the shepherd. They are also known for making some very poor decisions that leave them in trouble. It is not that uncommon for example, for a slightly overweight sheep to find a nice comfy hollow to lie in. But as it snuggles down, its centre of gravity can move and suddenly none of its feet are touching the ground. It's then stuck. Shepherd's refer to this as the sheep being cast, stuck on its back with its legs waving in the air and unable to get up....

Now, whilst this might appear funny to us, it can be rather serious for the sheep... without getting too biological, gasses can build up in its stomach, the blood supply is cut off from its legs and it rapidly gets weaker and weaker. If left alone it will die. But if a shepherd finds a cast down sheep, he can't just put it upright and walk away. He must turn it gently, rubbing its legs to bring the blood supply back and rubbing its stomach to let the gases go down and then support it until it is steady enough to walk by itself.

I think this is a wonderful picture of how God, our Shepherd, cares for us. Like sheep, we will often look for the comfy hollow to settle in, choosing the easy life, rather than following the shepherd. We can get distracted and lost down the cul-de-sacs of life... but God is the wonderful shepherd who daily comes and picks us up, puts us gently on our feet, and returns us to his flock. As the psalm says, He restores our soul.

As we know, life is a journey and there will be times when things are not easy - we find ourselves in a dark place, where we can't see where we are going and where we are afraid. And here the psalm promises us that God is by our side journeying with us. To get to the better pastures the Shepherd can't take the sheep along the ridges because the ground is too steep. Instead he must take them up the narrow, deep and dark valleys.

BUT in these valleys the sheep can't see where they are going, it is dark, there are predators, so they have no choice but trust to the wisdom and protection of their shepherd. In the same way David promises that God will be there to lead us through the dark times when we cannot see where we are going or what may be coming up from behind. David does not say he walks IN the valley of shadow of death but THROUGH it.

The sheep go through the valleys either on their way to the fresh grass of the high plateaus, or on their way back home. Like them, we will never stay permanently in the valleys, God will lead us out - either to a better place here, or to our ultimate home, but either way he promises to always walk with us.

The other thing you may notice when you look at the psalm and hymn, is that it starts in the third person, "The Lord is my Shepherd" "He makes me lie down" "He leads me", "he guides



me” but as soon as we have passed through the valleys the psalm turns to first person “you are with me” “your rod comforts me” “you anoint my head”.

God never promises to insulate us from the hard times in life, but he does promise to be with us through them. and if we stick with him through these times then our relationship with him will deepen and strengthen.

Finally, David promises that God will lead us home. “Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever”
Ultimately our journey through life will end. Whatever green pastures or dark valleys we are travelling through will finish and there God promises to be with us and to take us safely home. In saving us on the Cross, Jesus didn’t just save us for a better life here and now, but for an eternity with God. Now picturing what that might be like is not easy.

The thought of sitting on a cloud strumming a harp for ever doesn’t fill most of us with joy. So what can we actually know about eternity? Well we know it will be physical and not so dissimilar to what is around us now. The bible talks about a new earth, one like this one but perfect. It will therefore be much the same as living on earth, but also totally different, with no pain, no death, no tears.

CS Lewis expresses it brilliantly. At the end of The Last Battle, the finale of his Narnia books, that world is drawn to an end and as they look forward to what happens next CS Lewis says this: “And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

As we each head towards life with God forever we can know and trust that our Good Shepherd will be there with us and will lead us safely to his home. So put your life in his hands again and trust his love. He has promised to protect us every step of the way, no matter how easy or how dark the valley, he will be with us for ever and our hope will never fail.

A Prayer

In the book of Romans, Chapter 8, Saint Paul says this:- “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”



Heavenly Father, thank you that you are MY good shepherd, that you are by my side through the best times but also through the darkest of valleys, when life feels too hard, you promise never to leave me. And now, in the midst of this coronavirus, please draw close. Lead me, protect me, care for me and sustain me. I trust that you will lead me through these dark and uncertain times and will be by my side, whatever happens, for now and for ever more.

In Jesus name.

Amen

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