

Trusting the Shepherd ***Psalm 23***

I grew up in the city – Sydney, to be precise. Since then, I've lived in urban situations on the Central Coast, at Morisset and now here in Bathurst. The only exception was the five years we lived in PNG. That was a rural setting – a college community that included vege gardens, poultry, beef cattle and a piggery. On one side was a tea plantation and on the other coffee bushes. One year, for a dramatic production at Easter, they managed to rustle up a horse from somewhere – but no sheep.

I also grew up in the church. I learnt Psalm 23 when I was a child – from the Authorised Version. I heard it preached on. I heard pastors talk about the differences between ancient Middle Eastern shepherds and the vast sheep stations in outback Australia. I heard warnings that we come to this psalm with our cultural ideas rather than knowing the culture of Israel 3000 years ago. I learnt from such advice. Yet, for all those warnings, I think I still have something of a romantic view of this psalm. I suspect I think too much in terms of warm fuzzies – and I don't think that's a good thing.

The Concept of Shepherd

The psalmist uses a metaphor to describe God: shepherd. For him, and for the people of his day, it was a metaphor from everyday life. They didn't grow up in cities like Sydney. They knew shepherds. They knew what shepherds did. It was a multi-skilled occupation.

- The flocks were relatively small. The shepherds knew each sheep by name. They were responsible for each of the sheep.

- That responsibility included protection – protection from bandits, from wild animals, from the dangers of wild landscapes and from their own stupidity.
- That responsibility also included feeding the sheep – making sure the sheep got adequate pasture and sufficient water.
- They also tended the sheep – helped those that got into difficulty, doctored those with broken limbs or wounds, cared for those afflicted by pests and diseases.

Someone has summarised it as protection, provision and guidance. It'd be nice to get another *pro* word for guidance – the best I could come up with was *providence* – but I thought that was a bit too close to *provision*, so I stuck with *guidance*.

The shepherding process wasn't easy. We can read parts of this psalm:

He makes me lie down in green pastures,

He leads me beside quiet waters,

He restores my soul.

and very easily get the picture of a quiet Sunday afternoon stroll through the pleasant and lush countryside of Bega cheese country. Everything's plentiful and peaceful and pleasant and idyllic – nice warm fuzzies. But for the shepherd, life wasn't particularly easy.

- Wild animals threatened the flock.
- Bandits or foreign armies were all too willing to take the sheep for themselves.
- There were cliffs to fall over.
- Rocky terrain could cause injury.
- They could suffer the Middle Eastern equivalent of fly-strike.
- And on top of that the sheep were stupid enough to

get themselves into trouble quite regularly.

God as Shepherd

For Israel in the Wilderness

David isn't the first to use this metaphor of God. It's first found in Genesis 48:15 – when Jacob blesses Joseph's sons. Jacob seems to have the idea of God's deliverance in mind: that God kept him safe in the midst of dangers that threatened him. Jacob uses it again in the next chapter (49:24) when blessing his own sons. There the idea of God's help and God's blessing are present in the context. But in neither case is the image developed at any length.

Timothy Laniak, in a book entitled *Shepherds after My own Heart*, argues the metaphor's developed further in the account of the exodus. This isn't easy to demonstrate to you in a sermon, because I can't point you to any verse in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers or Deuteronomy that talks of God as *shepherd*. There aren't any. Yet, he argues, the language of shepherding is present – language associated with guiding and providing and protecting. We don't have time to go into the details this morning and it'd become a bit too tedious if we did. So let me paint with broad brush strokes instead.

- **Guidance:** God leads them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He takes them on a strange route that traps them between the Egyptians and the Red Sea – and then opens the sea for them that they may walk through. He leads them to Mount Sinai where He provides His instructions – thus giving them not just directions through the wilderness but also directions for how to live right. And so He continues to lead them throughout their

journey.

- **Provision:** He gives them the treasures of Egypt simply by them asking their Egyptian neighbours on their way out. Then they grumble and complain time and again about food and the lack of it and the lack of variety and He gives them manna from heaven for forty years and quail blown in by the wind. They complain about water and the lack of it or the bitter quality of it and He gives it to them from a rock or provides a tree to sweeten it or simply leads them to a place with twelve springs and seventy palm trees.
- **Protection:** He rescues them from slavery in Egypt. He destroys the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. He delivers them from the Amalakites' attack. He defeats the armies of Sihon and Og. He won't allow Balaam to curse them.

What's the purpose in it all? It's so they may know that Yahweh alone is God. It's so they may know the greatness of their God. It's so they may trust Yahweh as their true Shepherd.

Later writers say of this time:

*Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.
You led Your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron. (Ps.77:19-20)*

Or

*But He brought His people out like a flock;
He led them like sheep through the desert.
He guided them safely, so they were unafraid;
but the sea engulfed their enemies. (Ps.78:52-53)*

Now, why have I gone into all this detail about this earlier generation and haven't even got to Psalm 23 yet? I want us to see the perspective. God is Shepherd always.

- He's Shepherd to that generation coming out of Egypt.
- He's Shepherd to David.

Yet, the response of the two is very different.

- One complains and grumbles all the way – refusing to trust the wisdom of the Shepherd.
- The other rejoices in God's guidance and provision and protection.

And it's not simply that the earlier generation had it tough and David had it easy. We don't know when David wrote this psalm. Some suggest it's when he fled into the wilderness because Saul tried to murder him. Some suggest it's when he fled Jerusalem because his son Absalom tried to steal the kingdom. Others suggest other times. David didn't have an easy life full of warm fuzzies. This psalm came out of the reality of David trusting the Shepherd in difficult times. It's not talking about a problem-free life.

For David

Yet, as David says in verse 1:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

It's confidence in God. It's contentment in God. He explains it further in verses 2 and 3:

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,
He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness
for His name's sake.*

It's a picture of a contented sheep. I'm told sheep don't lie down when:

- they are fighting with other sheep;
- they are suffering from parasites;
- they are fearful of enemies; and
- they are searching for food.

I'm also told they don't lie down to eat. This sheep is contented. He's well-fed, well-watered, healthy, secure and resting. That's because the Shepherd looks after him. He provides. He guides. He protects.

Contentment's an important theme in the Bible. 1 Timothy 6:6

But godliness with contentment is great gain.

Paul gives his own testimony in Philippians 4:11

... for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Not, I know that the Shepherd will give me plenty in all situations or supply me with abundant riches all the time; but, I'm content whether in plenty or in want. And again in Hebrews 13:5

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

*"Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you."*

So we say with confidence,

*"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me?"*

It's a call to trust the Shepherd – to be confident in the Shepherd – to believe the Shepherd knows what He's doing.

What's the opposite? To seek contentment elsewhere. God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah and says:

My people have committed two sins:

They have forsaken Me,

the spring of living water,

and have dug their own cisterns,

broken cisterns that cannot hold water. Jer.2:13

Jeremiah's generation was no longer content with God and what God offered. They weren't satisfied. They turned to other things – other gods, other experiences, other ways of getting what they wanted. God wasn't working for them the way they expected Him to. And so they looked for contentment elsewhere.

Not David. He trusts his Shepherd – even when times look difficult; even when he doesn't understand. Verse 4:

Even though I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff,

they comfort me.

Sometimes the shepherd has to lead the sheep through hard terrain. The valleys were the dangerous places:

- places of shadows where wild animals hid;
- places where enemies came with their chariots;
- places where it wasn't always easy to see where to put your foot.

But sometimes it was necessary to go through such places – to leave one pasture ground that was eaten out to go to a new one with fresh grass. They had to trust the shepherd knew what he was doing – trust he had the ability to get them through.

Traditionally, shepherds carried two bits of wood.

- The cudgel or rod was used to bludgeon wild animals and thus protect the sheep.
- The crook or staff was used to keep the sheep in control and to direct them.

Verse 5:

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Many see this as a change of metaphor – moving from a shepherd to a banquet. Don Carson, however, suggests the anointing with oil is not so much a welcome for a feast, but a remedy to get rid of parasites and to clean out infections. It's part of the shepherd's tender care for the sheep.

And so David concludes with a strong affirmation of trust in the Shepherd.

Surely goodness and love will follow me

all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

For Jesus

That's David. He was an Israelite in covenant relationship with God. What's more, he was an Israelite king anointed as such by God's prophet. Can we simply take David's words and use them as if they're our own? Are we in the same relationship to the Shepherd? Can we simply say without any further preamble: God is my Shepherd? And the answer is: No.

As we considered a couple of weeks ago, these psalms are initially Jewish psalms. They're written in a Jewish context for Jewish people. They're for a people who'd entered into a special covenant with God. They're written in the context of that covenant. Yet, even for them, there were limits to how they could identify with these psalms. For, while they were in covenant relationship with God, they'd failed to live up to their side of the bargain. God wasn't pleased with them. They couldn't simply waltz into God's presence as if everything was honky-dory.

And, as we saw, that's where Jesus comes in. He says the Old Testament, including the Psalms, is about Him. God knew Israel would fail. But God's plan was bigger than Israel. It always centred on Jesus. So, how can we think of this psalm as being about Jesus?

First, think about it in terms of Jesus expressing trust in His Father – His Shepherd.

- When Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread to satisfy His hunger, Jesus replied that man lives, not on bread alone, but on the words that come from the Shepherd. He was satisfied with God's provision.
- When Satan tempted Him to throw Himself off the pinnacle of the temple to force God to prove His love and protection, Jesus refused to put God to the test. He was satisfied with what God had already told Him at His baptism.
- When Satan offered Him everything – all the kingdoms of this world – if only He'd bow down and worship Satan, Jesus again refused. He was satisfied with God's guidance – God's right ways that won victory via the cross.

As you trace through the record of Jesus' life, it's a record of how He submits always to the Shepherd's will.

- He doesn't use His power for His own ends.
- He doesn't set out on His own agenda.
- He doesn't complain about His humble lot in life.
- He doesn't demand His rights and stand on His position and wait for others to serve Him.
- He doesn't sin.

Rather He lives the life of a humble servant – and He becomes obedient to death, even death on a cross. He shows us how to live in true contentment – true trust in God. He's the upright man of Psalm 1. He depends fully on the Shepherd.

But more than that. Jesus turns this metaphor on its head. In the midst of a passage where He talks about sheep and shepherds, Jesus claims:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (Jn.10:11)

For His followers – for His sheep – Jesus provides and protects and guides. And the key factor in how He does this is via the cross – dying for His sheep.

There are a couple of key shepherd passages in the Old Testament that talk about this. We looked at one of them last year in Zechariah 9-14. Another of them is Ezekiel 34. God complains about the shepherds of His people. They're not interested in the sheep. They're only interested in themselves and exploiting the sheep for their own benefit. God's flock's in dire straights. God says He'll get rid of those false shepherds. He Himself will step in and rescue the flock. He'll bring back the strays, bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. He'll put things right.

And then, in verse 23, He says:

I will place over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

Jesus is that Shepherd.

For Us

This has become so commonplace for us that when we read Psalm 23 and say: The Lord's my Shepherd, there's a good chance we're thinking of Jesus. We're part of Jesus' flock. We're the sheep He came to rescue. We relate to God in Him.

And so, when we affirm:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
we acknowledge that God *has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ* (Eph.1:4). That is, in Jesus, God has given us everything we need. There's nothing we lack. We're content – or should be.

Sometimes, we struggle with that. We're still deluded by the thinking of this world. It's just so easy to think of things we think we lack: a big enough television, a new enough car, the latest fashions, the ideal job, enough money to go to a restaurant. The list goes on. It doesn't take much effort on our part to come up with things to add. What would you do if you had an extra \$500? Paul says he'd learnt to be content in plenty and in need. Have you? Maybe the first step is to acknowledge we're actually trying to learn to be content in plenty. One big problem we face is we believe so many luxuries are actually necessities – and to think we can't be content without

them.

In Jesus, God's given us everything we need. Do we believe that?

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,*

He provides me rest. The most important rest is our salvation. We don't have to earn our way to heaven. We don't have to work and strive to get into God's good books by the sweat of our own efforts. Jesus gets us in. The Shepherd died for His sheep. We're simply to enjoy the salvation He's given us.

That fundamental rest flows into other areas of our lives.

- We're no longer at war with God. We've given up that battle. We've switched sides. That does, however, mean we're now at war with the world.
- Yet, having said that, we're free from the rat-race. We're free from competing on the world's terms. We're free from having to strive to be considered successful on their terms. We march to a different drum.
- And from the position of rest and contentment, we're free to do good to others. The goodness God's shown to us can flow through us to benefit those around us.

Further, our Shepherd provides guidance.

*He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness
for His name's sake.*

Our Shepherd works to keep us on right paths. We find all sorts of other paths attractive.

- Pride in what we've achieved for ourselves.

- Envy of the wealth of others.
- Bitterness towards those who've hurt us.
- Lust fuelled by pornography and modern fashions.
- Greed fanned by browsing junk mail.
- Laziness when it comes to the things of God.
- Priorities focused on self.

We can always find excuses to go down these paths. We can always justify our lack of contentment in what's good and right and true. But they're all destructive. They all lead away from the Shepherd. They all involve great spiritual danger.

The Shepherd searches for us, brings us back, restores us and puts us back on the right path. And He does it for His sake – for His glory. How does He do this? He does it through His word – reminding us of the stupidity of worldly thinking and the wisdom of God's ways. That word may come through reading the Bible, hearing a sermon, being rebuked by a brother or sister, remembering a memory verse. Our Shepherd wants what's best for us – and so doesn't leave us to pursue our own selfish and self-centred agendas. He instructs us to forsake such idolatry and simply trust Him.

And He protects us.

*Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff,
they comfort me.*

It doesn't mean there aren't tough times. It doesn't mean we won't get seriously sick or suffer in other ways. It doesn't mean there are no Christian martyrs. But in all

those things, our Shepherd is with us – leading us, guiding us, working for His good purposes in our lives. Whatever our circumstances, He provides what we need for them – according to His perfect wisdom, not our own deficient thinking. He doesn't give up His sovereignty. He doesn't give up His goodness. He works in everything to bring about true godliness in our lives – because nothing's more important than that. Even death can't conquer us – because our Shepherd's already beaten that enemy and uses it to bring us into His eternal kingdom.

So, do you trust our Shepherd?

- Are you content with His provision – and, in this country, on a purely material level, we really have no excuse not to be – or do you grumble and complain because He hasn't given you your dreams?
- Do you believe His definition of the good life – a life characterised by godly character rather than good things – or are you intoxicated by some sin or some dream you don't want to relinquish?
- And when you face tough circumstances, do you still trust He knows what He's doing – or do you grumble and doubt His absolute goodness and try to take things into your own hands.

Our Shepherd laid down His life for us. He did it while we were still His enemies. Why would we ever doubt His good intentions towards us in the way He leads us through life?