

Psalm 23 – The Shepherd's Psalm



*The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not be in want
He makes me lie down in green pastures
He leads me beside quiet waters
He restores my soul*

Psalm 23

**A message from David Ratten
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**To the congregation at Montrose Church of Christ
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You can also watch this message on YouTube
<https://youtu.be/DAo6W0wjo68>

Undoubtedly, the best known and most loved of the Psalms is Psalm 23 – the Shepherd’s Psalm.

What is it about Psalm 23 that makes it such a favourite? Why is it that generations of people have loved this Psalm and derived great comfort from its words? Why is it that despite having read it at well over 100 funeral services, my heart is stirred afresh every time I read it? Well, today I hope that we can answer some of those questions as we look at the first 3 verses of Shepherd’s Psalm, Psalm 23.

Psalm 23:1-3. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.*

Our way of farming sheep in Australia does not help us understand what the Psalmist is expressing in Psalm 23. On an Australian farm, if you want some sheep to move from one area to another, you must herd them. Dogs are sent out to round them up. Men on motorbikes move behind them to push them in the chosen direction. A shepherd in Israel all those years ago did not round up his sheep and walk behind them. He called the sheep and led them. They would follow him wherever he went.

You can go to the Middle East today and watch a shepherd call his dozen or so sheep and lead them.

And so the psalmist writes, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Notice he does not say “The Lord is **our** shepherd.” This is personal and individual.

We are told that over 80% of Australians profess a belief in God. But I suspect that for many of them, the concept God as shepherd is like the Australian sheep farmer with tens of thousands of sheep. He may have a broad, benevolent interest in us, but certainly not a personal, individual concern. Even as Christians, at times we might feel very insignificant as we reflect on the size of the universe and the numbers of people in our world of whom the Lord is the shepherd. Could Almighty God really be interested in insignificant me?

The psalmist believes He is. “The Lord is **my** shepherd.”

Do you need to know today that the Lord is your shepherd? Do you need a fresh understanding of the truth that Jesus Christ loves you personally and that you are at the centre of his heart and are the focus of his attention? If you go away with nothing else from this message, I pray that you will be able to say with conviction, *The Lord is my shepherd.*

Remember, Jesus picked up the theme of a shepherd and his sheep when on one occasion he saw crowds of people and we read, *he had compassion on them, because*

they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36) On another occasion Jesus declared, "I am the good shepherd." (John 10:11).

Of course, if Jesus is the Good Shepherd then we are the sheep. Now, I am not convinced that I like being described as a sheep. After all, sheep are pretty dumb animals. They are stupid animals. They are devoid of common sense.

Have you ever watched sheep trials? I find it very frustrating to watch a very intelligent dog trying to persuade three very unintelligent sheep to move in a certain direction and to through gates and other obstacles. It was so frustrating to see these sheep learn nothing, and continue to be so stupid. These are the animals you and I are being likened to when the Psalmist, David says "The Lord is my Shepherd."

Possibly David doesn't know what he is talking about. Perhaps he has a naive even romantic view of a shepherd with his talented, intelligent and responsive flock. Of course, this is unlikely because David knew sheep. He had been a shepherd. Perhaps David also knew his own human heart. He knew how stubborn he could be. He knew how unresponsive to God he could be. He knew how easily he made dumb decisions in life that led him astray. David was happy to say, "The Lord is my shepherd", fully aware of the fact that he was the sheep.

I may not like being compared to a dumb sheep, but if the cap fits, wear it!

Well, the Psalmist continues, "**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want**" If you are a sheep, it matters a great deal who your shepherd is. After all, you are under his care and protection. If he is a careless shepherd, you could get lost. If he is a fearful shepherd, then he might run when there is danger. If he is an uncaring shepherd, you could go without food or water.

David says, "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*" There is great conviction in those words. David knew fear and grief and loneliness and brokenness. He knew what it meant to experience tough times in life. And yet with conviction he declares, "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*" I shall lack nothing.

I want to say to each of you today, that this can be your Psalm. These words can be your words. In the midst of brokenness, disappointment, grief, loneliness or despair, you can say, "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*" Our shepherd does not promise that we will not go through tough times, but he does promise to be there with us in our pain. What a difference it could make to our lives if we were to begin each day with the words, *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*

The psalmist continues, "**He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters.**" Makes me? That is a strong statement. The word being used here

in the Hebrew language has the meaning of compelling me or forcing me to lie down in green pastures. Why would our Lord want to force us to lie down?

I read the story of a tourist in Syria who became acquainted with a shepherd. Each day he noticed the shepherd carrying something to the sheep. He followed him one morning and found him taking food to one sheep with a broken leg. As he looked at the animal, he said to the shepherd, "How did the sheep break its leg? Did it fall into a hole or did some animal break the leg?" "No," said the shepherd, "I broke this sheep's leg myself." "You broke it yourself?" queried the surprised tourist. "Yes, you see, this is a wayward sheep, it would not stay with the flock, but would lead the sheep astray. Then it would not let me near it. I could not approach it, and so I had to break the sheep's leg so it would allow me, day by day, to feed it. In doing this it will get to know me as its shepherd, trust me as its guide, and keep with the flock."

"He makes me lie down in green pastures" The trouble with our modern lifestyle is we are too busy. We move too fast. There is no time to stop - to be still - to be quiet and to rest in green pastures. What does God have to do in your life to slow you down? To make you rest?

I have a friend Jess, who in January was helping her husband carry their new television into their house. How exciting! Jess, stumbled and dropped the television onto her foot. It hurt - and her foot was broken! It was such an inconvenience to a mother with two young children and a person with an important ministry role in her church. In an Instagram post at the end of January Jess wrote,

"This year hasn't quite started how I expected. But it has meant we have had lots of time to just dwell and hang together as a family. As I look to the year ahead, I feel God's challenge and encouragement to me is to just hold everything loosely and surrender to Him and whatever he has in store. I honestly have no idea what this year holds, but I do know the One who holds it all in His hands. So, here's to holding stuff loosely and living open-handedly with trust.

I was really proud of the way Jess chose to embrace a painful and difficult situation as an opportunity to slow down and spend quality time with her family and her God.

So what does God have to do in your life to slow you down? Far better that we build into our lives opportunities to lie down in green pastures – to cooperate with God in resting and being "still" with him. This time of Covid 19 lockdown is actually an opportunity for us slow down and spend time with the Good Shepherd.

I don't know what picture you get when you hear the words, *"He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters."* For me it is an idyllic scene. Lush green grass beside a peaceful bubbling stream. No flies! Warm but not too hot. No worries. Perfect tranquillity and peace. I don't get many moments like that. Life is too

busy - too full of worry and stress. We desperately need these moments with God. Why? The psalmist goes on to tell us. *"He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul."*

I love this picture of being restored. Have you ever seen a tired, broken, old piece of furniture that is worthless, be restored? It is renewed, enlivened, given new life. That is what God can do in your life and in my life. As we lie down in green pastures, beside quiet waters, our very soul can be restored.

We must take the time to allow God's healing, restoring work to take place in our lives. Coming to church is part of that process but it is deeper than that. Spending time with your Shepherd is vital. Handing over your pain and your fears, your insecurity and doubts is part of what it means to have your soul restored.

The challenge for us in the midst of our stressful lives, is to say "Lord, I'm just a dumb old sheep, I give you my life and my worries, my brokenness and my fears and I exchange them for your peace.

While entertaining a small group of people, a famous actor was asked by a white-haired old man to recite the twenty-third psalm. He did so and, after his polished performance, there was a burst of applause from the appreciative audience. Then, in an almost condescending way, the actor said to the old man, "Now what about you, my friend, would you like to stand up and recite that psalm for us?" With the aid of his stick the old man arose and in a thin, quavering voice began. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want..." When he finished, there was no applause nor was there a dry eye among his listeners. Greatly moved, the actor put his arm around the old man's frail shoulders and said "My friend, I know the psalm.....but you know the Shepherd."

Do you know the shepherd? Are you allowing him to lead your life? Are you taking time in the midst of your busy life to rest beside still waters so that your soul might be restored? God bless you this week as you take to heart the words of this beautiful Psalm and allow the Good Shepherd to lead your life.

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