

Prayers

Opening prayer

Bless us, Lord Jesus, as we go about our day. Keep close to us as we make decisions about our work, our homes, our finances, our relationships, and more; for in this way, we pray that our actions will be a true reflection of what You would have us do. You have created us to be Your people; may we therefore enjoy Your presence and Your guidance, and be excited by all the possibilities you put before us. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: action

1. For yourself

Pray for the strength to do what God requires of you, and ask the Lord to heal you

2. For your friends and family

Pray for any in your family who have trouble doing things because of incapacity or age

3. For the church and its work

Pray and ask the Lord to help your church be a place where things are done, and not just talked about/ Pray for the things done by your church fellowship this week or day.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray that the economic situation in the world would be met with firm action on the part of banks, governments and financial institutions

Meditation

Find the beauty in companionship,
For Jesus is our friend and respects our love:

Find the beauty in simply duties,
For Christ empowers us all to do good:

Find the beauty in helping the poor
For the Son of God brought hope to the world:

Find the beauty in doing what is right,
For the Spirit creates the fruit of the Spirit within:

Find the beauty in working with others
For the Father loves the unity of His people:

Find the beauty in overcoming problems
For the Lord our God is victorious over all evil:

Find the beauty is resting from all you do
For God Himself rested, and loves the Sabbath.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Psalm 23 (a)

A psalm of David.

¹ The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not be in want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,

- 3 He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness
for His name's sake.
- 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.
- 5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
for ever.

Review

To write any notes on Psalm 23 is a privilege; it is a scripture that has meant more than can possibly be expressed to countless millions of people over countless generations. But what is it that makes it such a great piece of literature? One of its most important features is the powerful image of God as a shepherd, which occurs in the first line of the psalm (23:1), but that is by no means all. It famously describes the troubles of life as like a '*valley of the shadow of death*' (23:4) in which God is still to be found, and it concludes with a vision of God's eternal banquet (23:5,6). All of this goes together to make up this brief and memorable Psalm, and it has undoubtedly been a source of great spiritual inspiration to generations of people.

From the beginning, we should keep in mind that Psalm 23 is seen by the Christian community at large as a powerful description of the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. People frequently read these words and feel the presence of Jesus within its calming and steadfast promises. It offers the promise of hope and restoration to those who place their trust in Him (23:1-3), and it does not avoid the agony of those experiences of life which bring a believer close to death (23:4). The fact that Jesus himself died on the Cross makes it easier to believe that God is with us even in the most difficult of circumstances. The last two verses then summarise everything Scripture says about God's intention to bless those who trust in Him.

But if we are to study this Psalm, then we must stand back from our immediate reactions to it, however helpful and encouraging they may be. We will find that Psalm 23 can say a great deal more to us, and if we are to explore this, then more than one of these studies is necessary. We will therefore look at Psalm 23 over three study days, with each day focusing on one of its three defining 'paragraphs'.

If we have read sequentially through the book of Psalms, then the first three verses of Psalm 23 are remarkably different from anything we have read before. They speak of the Lord God caring for people individually and guiding them, like a shepherd, to a place of peace. The well-known words of verses 2 and 3 present us with a powerful word picture of being at peace both with the world, '*He makes me lie down in green pastures*', and with God '*He restores my soul*'. We can find other places in Scripture that describe God in a similar way as a Shepherd (e.g. Ezekiel 34:15), or a guide (e.g. Psalm 25:9) or saviour (e.g. Psalm 118:14), but nowhere else in Scripture do we find a passage that is so expressive of God's love. Most of the Psalms describe God as saving his people from trials and distress, indeed we have just read one of the greatest of these, Psalm 22. Yet however wonderful the saving grace of God in the Psalms, none of them speak as warmly of God's personal care and attention as Psalm 23.

Psalm 23 begins with the famous opening line '*the Lord is my Shepherd*' (23:1). But where does this expression come from? God revealed himself as '*Lord*' firstly to Abraham (Genesis 15:7) and then to Moses (Exodus 3:14,15), a name meaning 'I am'. So from the earliest days of the Israelite people, God revealed himself as a personal God who spoke to people and worked in their lives for their own good and the good of others. Joseph was the first person who described God as 'my Shepherd' (Genesis 48:15). He said this when testifying to the power of the God of his ancestors, who has led him to gain a position of power in Egypt from where he could work to save his family from famine and disaster. The term clearly meant something to Joseph, because when his father Jacob came to bless him, towards the end of his life, he spoke of God's hand as being like 'a Shepherd' upon Joseph, for blessing (Genesis 49:24).

Centuries later, the great King David was called by popular acclaim to be 'a *shepherd of the people*' (2 Samuel 5:2), and the prophet Nathan goes further by prophesying that the King would be like a good '*shepherd*' of the people (2 Samuel 7:7). David was a man of great faith, however, and perhaps he knew something of the history of his own people and the stories of Joseph in particular, when he sought to return the title '*shepherd*' back to God, and call Him '*My Shepherd*' here in this great Psalm. No King or great leader of his people could ever be a perfect shepherd and meet every need; this was only possible with God.

Psalm 23 is remarkable both for the simplicity of its words and for their great power, perhaps no more so than its first line, '*The Lord is my Shepherd*' (23:1). But the phrases that follow are equally impressive and valuable. Being the perfect shepherd, the Lord God is able to supply every need to those who follow Him closely and observe His guidance (23:1,2); He is, as we would say, 'omnipotent'. Verse 2 then introduces the powerful pastoral picture of God as a Shepherd, guiding the individual to a place of rest, but for the purpose of restoring the soul (23:3). The rest and peace given by God here in Psalm 23 is not rest and peace for its own sake, but for the purpose of restoration. Those who follow the Lord are required to live in this world and battle through the most difficult and terrible of trials (see verse 4), but the peace of God is far greater than the worst terrors of the world. It must be, otherwise we would all be overcome by life's perils.

Lastly for today, Psalm 23 tells us that it is God who guides the individual '*in paths of righteousness*' (23:3). Now the Bible always requires God's people to work hard and strive to do what is right, but it also says that our true '*righteousness*' comes from God, and we cannot earn it. Psalm 23 helpfully tells us that not only does God require us to pursue righteousness, he leads us in our path of spiritual discovery. He helps us on the path of faith, because he wants us to succeed and to be with Him. This is the picture of the '*shepherd*' we find here in Psalm 23, and it spans both the Old Testament and the New.

Discipleship

Questions for groups

1. What are your immediate impressions of Psalm 23? Favourable, or unfavourable, or just heard at funerals for example?
2. What does Psalm 23 say to you about the nature of God?
3. Does the image of the Lord as a Shepherd speak to you directly? How can this picture be used when most people do not know anything about the work of a shepherd and what it entails?

Discipleship challenges

- *Look up some of the other passage of Scripture that mention the word 'Shepherd', as identified in the study. What do they say about God and how does this differ from what you read in Psalm 23? Pray about what it means to you to speak of God as 'My Shepherd'*
- *As you go about your daily routine, imagine that God is with you guiding and helping you, as a master helping a pupil or a shepherd leading sheep.*

Final Prayer

Almighty Lord, we see signs of Your love in all that is beautiful, compassionate and generous. But where there is ugliness, brutality and greed, we know that the Evil One is at work. Forgive us any part we have played in anything that is evil, and strengthen us to play our part in all that is good and beautiful and true. Save us we pray, Almighty God and Lord. AMEN