

Prayers

Opening prayer

In joy or in sorrow, in peace or in strife, in success or in failure, in pain or in liberty, may I hold on to You, Lord Jesus Christ, my Saviour and my Redeemer. Deliver me from every thought, word and deed which might separate me from You, and protect me from the works of the Evil One, I pray: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: action

1. For yourself

Thank God that you are someone who can do God's work in this world, and worship the Lord with gratitude, looking forward to what will happen next in your life

2. For your friends and family

Give thanks to God for all that you do as a family and as friends; worship the Lord with a grateful heart, looking forward to all that lies ahead

3. For the church and its work

Praise the Lord for the work of the church, and worship the Lord with hope that revival will indeed come within the world in our day.

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

Worship the Lord with a heart full of praise for the many things God is doing in the world today. Praise Him for the many people being saved and for His work, through us, to liberate the oppressed and meet the needs of the poor

Meditation

Take my home and make it Yours,
Lord Jesus Christ, of no abode.

Take my work and use it for good,
Lord Jesus Christ, carpenter.

Take my family and help us love one another,
Lord Jesus Christ, born of Mary.

Take my friends and show us how to really care,
Lord Jesus Christ, inspirational leader of men.

Take my church and guide us aright,
Lord Jesus Christ, Rabbi, Teacher, Preacher.

Take all I have and show me its real value.
Lord Jesus Christ, creator and sustainer of the Universe

Bible Study

Bible passage – Psalm 23 (b)

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

We began to study Psalm 23 yesterday, but there is so much for us to find within this marvellous Old Testament poem, it became necessary to split the Psalm into three sections, verses 1-3, verse 4, verses 5,6. This will enable us to unlock more of the treasures of this great psalm, so that we might know that God is a powerful God who longs to help His people and save them.

Now the first three verses of Psalm 23 described God's love for His people as like that of a 'Shepherd' who leads his flock with care and attention to their earthly needs, and guiding them in the right pathways. It is natural therefore for the reader to think of himself or herself as one of the sheep cared for by the great Shepherd. It would be unwise for us to take this analogy too far however, for people do not behave like sheep, and God does not treat those who follow Him, His disciples, like sheep. The analogy certainly tells us something about the authority and compassionate care of the Shepherd, but we should not delve into the Psalm to make something of what it does not say.

Looking carefully at the words, we can see something rather interesting. To begin with, the Shepherd takes the needy soul and gives rest and restoration (23:1,2), but having received the blessing of renewal, the Shepherd leads this disciple *'in the paths of righteousness'*, in other words, life does not stop, it goes on. God's help is offered not purely for the purposes of relaxation and retreat, but in order to help each soul on the pathways of life. It is not surprising, therefore, that the very next verse speaks of the soul experiencing difficulty, for life is full of difficulties. However much we like to think that life can be lived without stress, there is indeed no such thing as a life lived free from the perils and dangers of sin, or disease and death. No one can have the good things of this life and also escape its troubles.

So we arrive at verse 4, with its famous description of life's trials as like walking *'through the valley of the shadow of death'* (23:4). Unfortunately for a phrase at the centre of the psalm, there has been much debate about its meaning. Some Bible translations read more like this, *'even though I walk through a dark valley, I fear no harm'* (for example, in the New American Bible, or the Revised English Bible). This is because some scholars reckon that the Hebrew word used here, 'tsalmaweth', means 'shadows' or 'terrifying fear', and not the peril of proximity to death. Indeed, you will find that most Bibles have a footnote to the psalm here, indicating that the translation *'shadow of death'* is uncertain. Nevertheless, the earliest translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew, done in the centuries immediately before Jesus' life (the 'Septuagint'), interprets the verse in a similar way to our traditional *'valley of the shadow of death'*. For this reason, most evangelical scholars prefer this traditional reading of the ancient text. It has withstood the test of time as God's Word, so no purpose is served by changing it.

All this is important, but for those of us who are looking for an understanding of how God helps His people, verse 4 reveals a beautiful truth. The Shepherd accompanies the disciple through the *'valley of the shadow of death'*, meaning the toughest trials of life which are different for each of us, and also the ultimate trial which is the same for us all; death. It is the greatest comfort to know that as soon as we walk with the Lord as His disciple, we are in full possession of His promise to be with us whatever happens. There are no easy pathways within life; the pitfalls are there from the beginning, and this promise of the Lord is essential for our spiritual safety and welfare.

Interestingly, the Psalm now describes the Shepherd as using a 'rod' and 'staff' in order to 'comfort' us. This sounds strange to our ears, because such things sound like implements of control or punishment, rather than guidance or comfort! Now the first implement is a 'rod' or 'club', and it was certainly used offensively by a shepherd when warding off predatory animals preying on his sheep. The fact that it was an implement for killing is a little difficult for us, but, as we are reminded in earlier Psalms, what else does the Lord do to the enemy except destroy him? In addition, the 'rod' can have royal significance, the word is sometimes translated 'sceptre', which means something of royal authority and power. It indicates God's spiritual and practical protection of His people.

The second object mentioned in verse 4 is the 'staff', meaning the shepherd's crook or staff, and was an implement commonly used for controlling and disciplining sheep! It is familiar to us now as the sign of office of a bishop, and such, conjures up images of firm guidance and authority. However, Psalm 22 refers to it as something God uses to care for His people and discipline them. Certainly, if we want to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ then we must accept both of these; God's care and His discipline.

It is relatively for us to ask for the help and guidance of our Lord and 'Shepherd', but it is not so easy for us to accept His discipline as well as His care. We want the Lord's protection without having to face the cost of obedience and discipline. But to walk securely in the Lord's path and find our way through the '*valley of the shadow of death*' undoubtedly requires us not only to submit to His guidance but to accept His discipline. We can never be safe if we will not depart from our own ways and be disciplined into His.

Discipleship

Questions for groups

1. Explore where the 'safe places' are for all those who are discussing; places where they meet God for restoration and instruction as in Psalm 23
2. Does the path of discipleship become more challenging for you in the light of Psalm 23, or more comforting? Discuss the difference.
3. To what extent do we face death in our daily discipleship? How can the expression 'valley of the shadow of death' help our understanding of discipleship today?

Discipleship challenges

- *Write down a list of the different events in your life that might be described as valleys 'of the shadow of death'. Write down against each item your own description of how God has led you through each valley and how you have found peace again after distress. Praise God for His deliverance!*
- *Look ahead and ask yourself whether you fear anything about the future, some 'valley of the shadow ...' that is yet to come. Pray to God to ask Him to bless you and keep you safe if the valley is unavoidable.*

Final Prayer

Thank You, Lord God, for Your power, Your authority, Your discipline, Your care, Your protection, Your wisdom and Your love. As we walk with you in the streets of life, may we recognise, by the Spirit and the Word, what You are saying to us, what You are doing for us, and where You are guiding us. Make us sensitive to Your will, Lord God, we pray. AMEN