

Psalm 23:1-3

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[0 : 00] Thanks to Joe, thanks to David. My name's David. Good evening. I am a member of the church! And I add my welcome to Dave and to the other guys that have been up here. This is not a prop, this is because my knees have been sore. So if I do sit down on it, that's why I'm sitting down on it. So that's, yeah, just so you're aware, I'm not doing a Westlife thing. I'm just, I'm just, get dodging these. So today, you may have noticed, you should have noticed that tonight our passage is Psalm 23. Actually, we're in part one of a three-part series in Psalm 23. So I'm going to focus on verses one, two, and three tonight. And then next week, Jonathan's going to focus on verse four, and then the following week, he's going to do verses five and six.

And Psalm 23 might just be, as David mentioned, one of the most well-known passages in the Bible. It might be the best-known passage in the Bible. Whether you've ever been in church before or not, there's a good chance that you've heard Psalm 23. And actually, quite a few Christians, if they can recite any passage of the Bible by heart, it may well be Psalm 23, perhaps something that you want to challenge yourself to do over the next couple of weeks as we're in this very short Psalm together. But for now, just let me pray for us as we start this talk. I want to thank you for being our shepherd, being the one who goes before us and who leads us. Father, I pray that as we look through this Psalm and we see you at work, Lord, that you will be at work in our hearts, that you will open our hearts to the truth of your word, and that you will guide my words as well as I'm up here. We ask you in Jesus' name. Amen. At one level, it's actually quite strange why Psalm 23 would be such a popular Psalm. I don't know if you've ever been in the job interview where they ask you the question, if you could be any kind of animal, what kind of animal would you be and why? I don't know if anybody's got any good answers to that. Has anybody got a good answer to that one? A go-to animal?

A sloth. A sloth. I read online that's one of the ones you're not supposed to do. I definitely heard that. Apparently dolphin. Dolphin's a great one because they're intelligent and they solve problems and the working groups and blah, blah, blah, blah. So there's one little tip for you. It's got nothing to do with Psalm 23. But nobody ever says sheep, do they? Nobody ever says sheep. No one's ever like, yeah, I'm a bit of sheep, but I kind of, I just follow whoever bleats the loudest and I've got no self-awareness and I've got no awareness of danger. And if you leave me alone for five minutes, they'll probably fall down a ditch or drown in a water trough. We don't say that. But we all love a psalm that pictures God as a shepherd and therefore pictures us as sheep.

Sheep don't actually have a lot going for them, do they? Sheep lack a lot. They have a lot of lack. Sheep rely on a good shepherd. But before we think any further on sheep, let's start where the psalm starts, with the Lord as shepherd. I'm just going to read our three verses again, if that's okay.

[3 : 43] It starts with this. The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

David Gibson in his book, *The Lord of Psalm 23*, which the church has been plugging a little bit, takes verse one as the key verse in Psalm 23. And I think he's right. It says it's the verse where the whole psalm is packed in. The whole psalm is packed in to that first verse. And what's interesting is that immediately within the first five words that we have, God is described in two ways. He's named as the Lord and he's named as the Lord who is my shepherd. We get these two names for God. And we shouldn't skip the first of these names, the Lord, because it is quite significant. You see, when the psalmists speak about God, they tend to use his personal name.

It's here translated, the Lord. The Lord is not just a title. It's not just a job description. It's a name. In Exodus 3, when Moses meets God in the fiery bush and he says to the Lord, what is your name?

God replies, my name is Yahweh. My name is I am. My name is the Lord. Yahweh is the original Hebrew, which gets translated as I am, or it gets translated as the Lord. And 6,800 times over that in the Old Testament authors use God's own name when they're speaking about him. They use his personal name.

When the Old Testament people worship, they worship the God who they know. When they speak to God, they speak to the God that they know the name of. Why? Because as he promised to Moses in Exodus 6, he was going to be their God and they were going to be his people. And it's particularly incredible when you think about that name itself. Moses says to God, who are you? Who are you? What do I call you?

[6:10] What do I tell the people you're called? And he says, I am who I am. Moses is looking for some sort of name to define God. Something where he can explain God to the people who haven't met him.

And God's like, no, it doesn't work like that. You're not getting a name by which you can define me. You're not getting a name by which you can explain me and put me in a category. I am who I am. He's saying really to Moses there in Exodus 3, you don't have the categories to define me, but I will be your God and you will be my people. And so Yahweh, the Lord, is associated throughout the Bible with the idea of God's holiness, his set-apartness, his power. It's associated with ideas of his covenant love, his going along with the people and making that people his people.

And we see in it all these types of character attributes of the Lord. And as the Bible story develops, we see that Yahweh, the Lord, acts time and time again as shepherd to his people.

In verses 2 to 3 of our psalm, what does the shepherd do for the sheep? Well, it says here, doesn't it, that he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right path. It gives us an image. It's actually a really easy image to picture. We get a really clear picture of this in our minds from these verses. We get a picture of the sheep trotting along, being a sheep, not a care in the world saying, bah, or whatever Hebrew sheep say.

[8:19] It's probably got a khat sound in it. And it has abundant food from those green pastures. It has safe, quiet, still water that it can drink from those quiet waters. It has joy in its soul. It is on the right path where it should be. It's safe. It's secure. It's well fed. It's looked after. It is happy.

And this we find time and time again is what Yahweh always does for his own people. So it's one of the interesting features of these verses is that they continue that biblical theme that is already, before you ever come to the book of Psalms, it's already well established throughout the Old Testament. And in fact, it seems here in Psalm 23 that there are a few places where David is making deliberate reference to that biblical theme that's been established in previous books. He's recalling specific words and phrases and instances from previous places to show that God's leading is something that has always happened to the people in the past.

So it's very common in biblical narrative for the people of God to be led. As I'm saying, we find the people of God beginning with Abraham being led from Ur through Canaan, and then the people being led from Canaan down into Egypt, and then the people being led from Egypt up through the desert where they spend, for various reasons, if you don't know the story, 40 years roaming through the desert before they get to the land that God has promised them. And moreover, there's lots of individual stories of individuals who God loves and blesses being led here and there and going to a place where they'll learn some things and then being brought to another place, which is good for them, and finding themselves in the right place. And so the shepherd image is natural.

And it kind of works in that ancient Near Eastern Israel type context in a way that we maybe don't think of. Ancient Near Eastern shepherds, they had to move their flocks around a lot to find good grazing land.

[10:50] They don't have the lush green meadows that we have. You have to move the flock to find the right places. And Jacob in Genesis 49:15, when he's praising God, he praises God who has been my shepherd.

God who has led me. This is Jacob as an old man. God who has led me and been my shepherd. Reflecting how God has physically led them and protected them throughout his life.

Other psalms specifically link shepherd imagery to Yahweh leading his people from Egypt, through the desert, to the promised land, what we call the Exodus. Just like he promised Moses he would. Feel free to flick over to Psalm 77, for example. I'll find a page reference in a second. So page 5.8.

Actually 5.8. Page 5.90 because I'm going to the end of it. Page 5.90. Verses 19 and 20. They're saying this to God.

[11 : 58] Look over on to the next page of Psalm 78, verses 51 to 54.

He says, He struck down all the firstborn of Egypt, the first fruits of manhood in the tents of Ham. But he brought his people out like a flock.

He led them like sheep through the wilderness. He guided them safely so they were unafraid. But the sea engulfed their enemies. And so he brought them to the border of his holy land, to the hill country his right hand had taken.

And so it's good for us to ask, is the psalmist doing what I said he was doing? Is he deliberately making reference to this theme of God taking his people, leading his people, bringing his people and delivering his people to a land where they are looked after?

And I think, yes, he is. That is exactly what he's doing. See, there seems to be a few direct references to God saving his people and leading to the promised land. For example, in verse 1 of Psalm 23, it says, The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing.

[13 : 23] Now, in the big picture of God saving his people, what does it mean to lack nothing? Well, it seems to refer directly to the main point of the Exodus.

Throughout the Exodus, Yahweh, who lacks nothing, is leading his people to a land where they will be fully provided for, where they will lack nothing.

And just as the people were about to enter that land, just as Moses, as an old man, is about to hand over and allow the people to go over to the Jordan and enter that land, he says, in Deuteronomy chapter 2, verse 7, he says, These 40 years the Lord your God has been with you and you lacked nothing.

The exact same phrase, you lacked nothing. You 40 years through the desert, you lacked nothing. What about those green pastures in verse 2?

Pasture, the original word can be translated pasture. It can be translated, sometimes it's translated abode. Sometimes it's translated dwelling place. It's the idea of a place where you can live that is safe.

[14 : 35] That's the general idea behind that word that can be translated in a number of different ways. In Exodus 15, 13, Moses, just after crossing the Red Sea, says, In your unfailing love, you will lead the people you have redeemed.

In your strength, you will guide them to your holy dwelling. Same word. Your dwelling, your pasture, same word. In Exodus, he will lead to the holy dwelling.

In Psalm 23, they've arrived. And he makes me lie down in green pasture. Same word, same idea of God leading. What about those quiet waters? Literally translated waters of rest.

And again, in many places, the land that God leads his people to is going to be a place of rest. A place where they can rest with their God. A place where they can rest from their enemies. Deuteronomy 12, 19 is an example.

But it's not the only place where the promised land is a place of rest from enemies and rest with their God. Even the final words of verse 3.

[15 : 44] He guides for his name's sake. And the Lord is clear that saving his people is not only for their benefit, but for the glory of his name.

Exodus 7, 5 is an example. If you're wanting a little example to take note of. But all the way through the story, it's the same story.

The people are being taught to praise the name of the Lord. Now I don't know how the big picture Exodus Bible overview stuff resonates with you.

I don't know if it does resonate with you. There's some people that absolutely love it. Some people absolutely love seeing the big picture stuff being represented in smaller passages and in poetic passages.

Perhaps for you, however, the big picture stuff seems a little bit out there, a little bit historical, a little bit just less tangible and less easy to grab.

[16 : 42] So am I saying that Psalm 23 is simply David doing a poetic version of something that everybody already knew, that God delights his people in, that there's this big Bible theme.

Is he finding a poetic way to just simply retell the story of the Exodus? No, I don't think that's all that he's doing. There are a lot of passages that contain big picture imageries of God as shepherd to his people.

But what does Psalm 23 actually do? Well, it doesn't say the Lord is a shepherd. It doesn't even say the Lord is the shepherd.

It doesn't even say the Lord is our shepherd. Psalm 23 is a statement of personal trust written by an individual who can stand up and say, the Lord is my shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd. I, therefore, lack nothing. And as we move on to think about that statement, I lack nothing.

[18:02] We have to note how counterintuitive a statement that can be for us. We've already noted, haven't we? We're sheep in this passage.

And sheep lack a lot. Sheep have a lot of lack. As one farmer on the most recent series of Clarkson's Farms says, quite matter-of-factly, sheep just die, don't they?

And very often we feel the lack, don't we? We do. We feel our lack of ability.

We feel our lack of strength. We feel our lack of spirituality. As Paul says, who is weak and I am not weak?

And our culture doesn't make it any easier for us, does it? Our culture constantly tells us, you lack this, you lack that, you lack the next thing, you lack everything that you need.

[19:04] And sometimes we look around a room like this and we think, if only I was in that person's situation or that person's situation and that person's situation. That's what I need.

And so this question of what we lack can be really pressing for us. I'm convinced it is one of those questions that we'll try and answer and we'll answer and be happy for a while and it'll come back and it'll come back for many of us and it'll come back.

And sometimes we just try harder, work harder and push harder, don't we, when we feel that sense of lack. Just get the head down and push through.

Yet no matter what we achieve, no matter how hard we work, no matter what we work towards, nothing's given us that Psalm 23 verse 1 confidence that says, I lack nothing.

Well, how did David or Psalmist get there? Well, what he seems to be showing us is this confident confession that when Yahweh, when the Lord, when the Lord over all, the Lord who is so far removed from our position and our place, who is sovereign and powerful over all, holy in the heavens and can do whatever he likes, when the Lord is our shepherd, when the Lord is our shepherd, then he provides green pastures and those green pastures are for me.

[20:42] He provides quiet, restful water that is for me. He restores souls and therefore he restores my soul. He leads in the right path and therefore I am led in the right path.

So when the Lord provides, when this Lord provides, I have no lack. Does that mean that David gets everything he wants whenever he wants it?

No. But then it never did, did it? There's never a single biblical example where anyone gets everything they want. Whenever they want it.

Not for any Bible character, not for David, not for you and not for me. The last words in verse 3 actually explain this. It says it's all for his name's sake. He leads us for his name's sake.

He gives us everything we need, but with a big purpose, with a big picture and with big blessings in mind, which I think David goes on to even speak more of in later verses.

[21:57] And it's consistent all the way through the Bible. James chapter 1 says, every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

He gives good things out of his abundant planning and for knowledge for his name's sake. Does David's confident expression, I have no lack, mean that he never feels weakness or he never feels lack.

And I think biblically we have to say no to that as well. You know, look at so many of the other David Psalms. Look at the start of Psalm 22. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me? So far from my cries of anguish, my God. I cry out by day but you do not answer by night but I find no rest. Feelings of weakness, feelings of pain, feelings of distance, feelings of lack are all normal in a broken world so it's not the way that it's going to one day be.

And so many Psalms are written to help worshippers to see God's truth in the middle of pain and weakness and fear and these feelings of lack.

[23:20] And so many Psalms hold on to God's promises while those promises still seem so far away and so far out of reach and beyond their ability to grasp them. David in Psalm 23 is essentially

doing the same thing.

He's holding on to the same promises in the same way. He's just a little bit more settled. He's just got more of a sense here that they are here, they are there to be grabbed. And he's focused on the reality here that God's leading and God's provision means that I am led for.

I am led and I am provided for. And you know, for all of David's confidence, for everything that he has to anchor those promises onto, you and I have more reasons, not less reasons, more reasons than David has to hold on to this same hope and this same confidence statement, I have no lack. You see, David could see that God acted as a shepherd for his people and sheep need a good shepherd. But we in 2025 can see so much more of the Bible's story than David ever had access to. We can read directly the words of Jesus who says in John 10 chapter 11, I am the good shepherd. I am the good shepherd, says Jesus.

[24 : 52] Jesus pushes that shepherding imagery as far as it can go when he then goes on to say and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

And on the basis of scripture, I can tell you that if the good shepherd has laid down his life for you, you lack nothing.

If Jesus is your shepherd, you lack nothing. You might feel your weakness every day. You might look around you and think everybody else has it all together.

But if Jesus is your shepherd, you lack nothing. and if you're here and you're new to the Christian faith, if you're looking in on church and you're thinking, what do I need to do to have this type of relationship with God for him to be my shepherd, to have this sort of relationship that the psalmist is speaking about?

Well, there's no qualification. we're all weak sheep, aren't we? It's simply trusting Jesus, asking him to lead you as your shepherd, asking his forgiveness for your sins.

[26 : 15] And as I finish now, I'm reminded as I look at these words, of the words of an old hymn that was based on Psalm 23.

We don't have it in the book. I would have asked for us to sing it if we did. But it gets these ideas spot on. It says this, the king of love my shepherd is.

His goodness faileth never. I nothing lack if I am his and he is mine forever.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the good shepherd, the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

We thank you that in you, Lord, you've provided everything we need to Lord, that even though we feel pain, weakness and lack every day, that you have given us everything that we ultimately need to have that relationship with you.

[27 : 17] And Lord, as we reflect on this over the next few weeks, we pray that we see even more depth to that love that you have for us and the way that you lead us. Amen. Great.

Tito. Tito.