

Sunday 24th January: Psalm 23 – ‘The Shepherd’

‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.’ Probably the best-loved words of the whole bible – almost certainly the most well-known. You’ll find it on countless walls, mantlepieces and bedside tables in peoples’ homes, and, even today, probably a third to a half of funerals will have it read or sung. Psalm 23 is one of those pieces of scripture that has penetrated deep into our culture.

And yet the image is one that is barely familiar to most of us now. It’s easy to see why the psalm was so popular in an agrarian society. But today very few of us even *know* a shepherd. I used to love ‘One man and his dog’ as a kid, to be honest I would probably happily watch it now. But for me, growing up as a kid in inner-city London it was something exotic. Nowadays we have the Shepherdess reality series on Channel 5, which again is popular because it’s an unusual job, and we wonder what a shepherd or a shepherdess does.

So what does it really mean for God to be our shepherd? We *think* we know what it means, but is the reality quite what we think it is?

Let’s start with the first word of the psalm: ‘Yahweh’ – the Jews’ personal name for God. In a culture with lots of gods, it matters who our shepherd is. And King David, who grew up as a shepherd and therefore knows what he’s talking about, wants to be very clear on this. There is only one divine shepherd: the God of the Jews, Yahweh. The Lord is our shepherd.

But what does this shepherd do? Here’s where we have to abandon our British image of a shepherd to really get to the heart of this psalm. In ancient Israel, there are no hedgerows or fences. The shepherd is not based on a farm as we know it but wanders over a wide area, living with their sheep. Water is scarce and hard to find. Any areas which do have more water are set aside for growing crops and the sheep have to keep away from them, or face the wrath of the farmer. There are wild animals too, from which the sheep must be defended.

In other words, this is not a psalm of lush pastures on pleasant summer evenings. It is psalm of survival in tough, semi-arid hill country. To give you a flavour of what that really looks like, I’m going to show you a short video filmed on location in Israel in *the actual landscape that a shepherd like David would have used.* We’ll see what David really means by finding the ‘right paths’ and also what ‘green pastures’ really are. It’s about 4 minutes, but the insights are worth every second....

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I don’t know about you, but I find that really helps me to earth Psalm 23 in my own life, especially in these difficult times. Here in the UK we may not have ‘belly-high alfalfa’ as the speaker puts it, but we do have lots of thick green grass. Which is all very well when life is good or even OK: but how do we use this psalm when the pasture is scarce?

Well, in fact this psalm is set in a context where the sheep always have just enough. And the paths are not straight to a destination but they go round hillsides, just like life. In fact, what we learn from seeing real Israeli shepherds is that **this is a psalm for real life.** A life marked by struggles, where the journey is uncertain and green pastures are hard to find.

And in the midst of this real life we find a real God – a real shepherd. Notice how God takes the initiative throughout: ‘he makes me lie down; he leads me; he refreshes or restores; he guides me; he prepares the table.’ Even the last image which appears on first glance to be one where we’re ahead: ‘surely your goodness and love will follow me...’ – the word ‘follow’ is best translated as pursue, it’s an active word. Even when we’re not doing well with God or with life, *God’s love and goodness chases after us*, it pursues us to bring us home.

And in the heart of the psalm we find this wonderful affirmation: ‘You are with me.’ Not I am with you – though of course we are. What matters is that, **wherever we are, you are with me.** The divine shepherd takes the initiative in our lives, from start to finish.

So it’s no wonder that this psalm is probably the best loved chapter of the bible. Not because it is cute and twee, but because it defines a real life permeated with the love, protection and blessing of a real God. In this dark season, let’s rediscover the simple joy of this psalm:

May we too let God lead us through the darkest valley, that we might find enough green pasture day-by-day. May we too never forget that God’s love and goodness chases after us, bringing us home. Whatever life throws at us, may we affirm these words at its heart: *you* are with me. And may we too dwell in the house of this God for as long as we live. Amen.